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## Cultural Representation on Social Media and Its Impact on the Identity Construction of the Young Generation

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### ABSTRAK

Social media has become the primary arena through which young people encounter, negotiate, and perform cultural identity. This systematic review examines how social media platforms function as spaces of cultural representation and how such representations shape identity construction among adolescents and young adults. Drawing on 19 empirical studies published between 2021 and 2025, the review identifies three dominant representational forms: visual symbols and aesthetics, community-based cultural narration, and cross-cultural interaction spaces. Findings reveal that social media facilitates the emergence of hybrid, fluid identities that blend local traditions with global digital culture. However, this process is accompanied by significant risks, including cultural erosion, normative pressure from idealized representations, social comparison, and identity conflict. Critical digital literacy, culturally grounded education, and psychosocial support are identified as essential mediating factors in enabling healthy identity construction. The review proposes an integrated conceptual framework connecting cultural representation, identity formation processes, and contextual moderators. Implications for educational policy, school counseling, and digital cultural studies are discussed.

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### INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter/X, and WhatsApp has fundamentally reconfigured the cultural landscape inhabited by today's younger generation. For adolescents and young adults, these platforms are not merely communication tools; they constitute dynamic arenas where culture is encountered, interpreted, produced, and contested on a daily basis. Through the curation of profile pictures, captions, hashtags, short-form videos, and community memberships, young people actively participate in the construction and negotiation of cultural identity in ways that have no clear precedent in earlier generations (Putikadyanto et al., 2021; Nurhidayah et al., 2025).

The concept of cultural representation on social media encompasses the diverse ways in which symbols, values, practices, and narratives of cultural belonging are made



visible and meaningful within digital spaces. These representations range from the display of traditional motifs and local languages to the adoption of globally circulating aesthetic trends and subcultures (Lin, 2025; Echesony, 2024). Crucially, social media does not function as a neutral mirror of pre-existing cultural identities; rather, it operates as an active mediating force that shapes, amplifies, distorts, and selectively valorizes certain cultural expressions over others (Aguessy & Fandy, 2025; Yao, 2025).

For the young generation—particularly Generation Z (born approximately 1997–2012)—questions of identity are inextricably entangled with their digital lives. Growing up in an environment saturated with algorithmically curated content, young people navigate constant exposure to diverse and often competing cultural representations. This exposure opens rich opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue, creative self-expression, and the formation of inclusive, cosmopolitan identities. At the same time, it introduces significant psychological and social risks, including the internalization of unrealistic beauty and success standards, the erosion of local cultural values, social comparison-induced anxiety, and fragmented or conflicted identity development (Roussou & Papaioannou, 2021; Avci et al., 2024; Farci & Scarcelli, 2023).

In the Indonesian context, these dynamics take on particular significance. As a nation of extraordinary cultural diversity comprising hundreds of ethnic groups, regional languages, and distinct local traditions Indonesia presents a unique case study in the tension between global digital culture and local identity preservation. Research indicates that Indonesian youth, like their counterparts in other postcolonial societies, are navigating the complex interplay between global cultural flows and local identity anchors in their social media practices (Nurhidayah et al., 2025; Nugraeni, 2024; Sugeng et al., 2022).

Despite the growing body of research on social media and youth identity, the literature remains fragmented across disciplinary boundaries spanning media studies, cultural studies, developmental psychology, sociology, and education. Comprehensive syntheses that integrate findings across these domains are needed to provide a holistic understanding of how cultural representation on social media shapes identity construction processes. This systematic review aims to address this gap by: (1) mapping the dominant forms of cultural representation found on social media; (2) examining how these representations influence identity construction in young people; (3) identifying the risks and opportunities associated with this relationship; and (4) deriving evidence-based implications for education, counseling, and policy.

The review is guided by the theoretical framework of cultural identity as a dynamic, negotiated, and performative process (Hall, 1990), situated within the broader context of digital culture and globalization. Social media platforms are conceptualized as "third spaces" (Bhabha, 1994) in which young people creatively synthesize local and global cultural elements, producing hybrid identities that resist simple categorization. Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework underpinning this review.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Research Design**

This study employed a systematic review methodology to synthesize empirical evidence on cultural representation on social media and its impact on the identity construction of young people. The review followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency,

reproducibility, and rigor in the identification, screening, and synthesis of relevant literature (Page et al., 2021).

## 2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they: (1) were published in peer-reviewed journals or conference proceedings between 2021 and 2025; (2) focused on adolescents and young adults (approximately 12–30 years) as the primary population; (3) empirically examined social media's role in cultural representation, cultural identity, or identity construction; and (4) were written in English or Indonesian. Studies were excluded if they addressed media use without reference to cultural or identity dimensions, or relied purely on theoretical argumentation without empirical data.

## 2.3 Search Strategy and Study Selection

Systematic searches were conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and DOAJ using keyword combinations including "social media AND cultural identity", "social media AND identity construction", "digital culture AND youth identity", "cultural representation AND Instagram", "hybrid identity AND social media", and "Gen Z AND cultural identity". The initial search yielded 214 records. After deduplication ( $n = 31$ ), 183 records were screened by title and abstract. Sixty-two full-text articles were assessed for eligibility; 19 studies met all inclusion criteria and were retained for analysis.

## 2.4 Data Extraction and Synthesis

Data were extracted using a standardized form capturing author(s), year, country/context, research design, sample characteristics, theoretical framework, key findings, and limitations. Given the qualitative and conceptual heterogeneity of the included studies, a narrative synthesis approach was employed. Studies were organized thematically around three overarching domains: (1) forms of cultural representation on social media; (2) impacts on identity construction; and (3) mediating and moderating factors. Methodological quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT).

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## 3.1 Overview of Included Studies

The 19 studies included in this review span diverse national contexts, including Indonesia, China, India, Nigeria, Egypt, Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United States, Ireland, Italy, Greece, and the Naga region of Northeast India. Study designs included qualitative case studies ( $n = 6$ ), quantitative surveys ( $n = 5$ ), mixed-methods research ( $n = 4$ ), systematic reviews ( $n = 3$ ), and conference papers reporting empirical data ( $n = 1$ ). The majority of studies focused on Instagram and TikTok as the primary platforms of analysis, reflecting their dominance in the social media landscape of young people globally. Table 1 presents the main dimensions of cultural identity representation identified across the included studies.

**Table 1. Dimensi Representasi Identitas Budaya Generasi Muda di Media Sosial**

Dimensi	Deskripsi	Contoh Praktik di Sumber Media Sosial
Eksistensi & Aktualisasi Diri	Penampilan diri sebagai individu unik melalui konten digital	Feed tematik, Instagram Story, caption reflektif

Representasi Sosial-Budaya	Menampilkan nilai, adat, dan aktivitas budaya lokal	Konten adat istiadat, penggunaan bahasa daerah, simbol tradisional	Nurhidayah et al. (2025); Nugraeni (2024)
Personal Branding & Estetika	Kurasi citra ideal melalui estetika visual yang konsisten	Palet warna, tema feed, filter dan preset foto	Nurhidayah et al. (2025); Putikadyanto et al. (2021)
Identitas Hibrida Global-Lokal	Perpaduan elemen budaya lokal dengan pengaruh budaya digital global	Penggunaan bahasa gaul global + simbol lokal, fashion fusion	Echesony (2024); Lin (2025); Varghese (2025)
Perbandingan Sosial & Norma	Evaluasi diri berdasarkan standar yang direpresentasikan di platform	Mengikuti tren kecantikan global, mengadopsi gaya hidup influencer	Aguessy & Fandy (2025); Farci & Scarcelli (2023)

Sumber: Sintesis dari berbagai studi empiris (2021–2025)

### 3.2 Forms of Cultural Representation on Social Media

Across the included studies, three dominant forms of cultural representation on social media were identified. The first and most pervasive is visual and aesthetic representation. Young people use profile pictures, curated feeds, visual motifs, clothing, and symbolic imagery to communicate cultural belonging and personal identity. Lin (2025), in a study of Chinese Generation Z users, found that profile pictures function as sophisticated cultural signals, encoding ethnic heritage, generational affiliation, and aesthetic values simultaneously. Similarly, Putikadyanto et al. (2021) document how the presentation of self on social media in the digital age has become an elaborate performance of identity through carefully chosen visual codes.

The second form of representation involves community-based cultural narration. Instagram accounts associated with student organizations, local community groups, and cultural associations serve as platforms for narrating and affirming collective cultural identities. Nurhidayah et al. (2025) analyzed the Instagram practices of the Gebyar Pelajar Lampung community in Indonesia, finding that members systematically used the platform to represent their regional cultural identity across three interconnected dimensions: existential self-actualization, socio-cultural representation, and personal branding. This multi-layered approach reflects the complex and intentional character of cultural identity performance on social media.

The third form involves cross-cultural interaction and dialogue. Many young people actively engage with international content, participate in transnational trends, and build connections across cultural boundaries through social media. Yao (2025) found that digital media applications significantly influence cross-cultural communication and the construction of cultural identity, with young users selectively adopting and adapting foreign cultural elements into their existing identity frameworks. Rawat et al. (2025) further document how social media usage patterns related to cultural identity vary across generations, with younger cohorts demonstrating more fluid and selective approaches to cultural adoption.

### **3.3 Impact on Identity Construction: Opportunities**

The literature consistently identifies several important positive contributions of social media cultural representation to identity construction in young people. Most prominently, social media facilitates the emergence of hybrid identities that creatively blend local cultural heritage with global digital culture. Echesony (2024) found that social media enables urban youth to construct dynamic cultural identities that draw simultaneously on multiple cultural sources, producing forms of self-expression that are neither simply traditional nor straightforwardly global. Similar findings are reported by Varghese (2025) among Naga youth in Northeast India, where social media serves both as a vehicle for cultural preservation and a platform for articulating a contemporary, globally connected Naga identity.

Social media also provides young people with unprecedented opportunities for cross-cultural learning and the expansion of cultural horizons. Sahu and Verma (2025) document how Indian youth's engagement with global social media content has accelerated processes of cultural exchange and identity exploration, facilitating what they describe as "evolving identities" shaped by cosmopolitan exposure. Avci et al. (2024), in a systematic review of social media use and adolescent identity development, found that active and authentic engagement with social media can support identity exploration and commitment, particularly for adolescents from marginalized or minority cultural backgrounds who may find online communities more affirming than their immediate offline environments.

For communities facing pressures of cultural marginalization or diaspora, social media has proven a powerful tool for cultural preservation and solidarity. Bubshait (2025) found that Bahraini youth actively use social media to maintain and reinforce their cultural identity in the face of globalization pressures, while Ahamed et al. (2024) report similar patterns among Omani youth who deploy social media strategically to document and share traditional practices.

### **3.4 Impact on Identity Construction: Risks and Challenges**

The literature equally documents a range of significant risks associated with cultural representation on social media for young people's identity development. The most extensively documented risk is that of normative pressure and idealized self-presentation. Aguessy and Fandy (2025) argue that social media platforms have fundamentally altered cultural dynamics in the United States by promoting standardized norms of beauty, success, and social acceptance that many young people internalize as benchmarks for self-evaluation. Muyidi (2025) found that Saudi young adults engage in highly strategic self-presentation on social media, driven by awareness of prevailing cultural norms and desire for social approval, a pattern that can contribute to inauthentic identity performance and psychological distress.

Gender representations on social media present a particularly concerning dimension of normative pressure. Farci and Scarcelli (2023), in a study of digital youth cultures and popularity, found persistent and highly gendered norms operating across social media platforms, with young women consistently expected to display physical attractiveness as a condition of social recognition, while young men were expected to demonstrate competence and achievement. These gendered representational norms shape how young people understand and perform their identities, often in ways that reproduce rather than challenge existing inequalities.

The risk of cultural erosion and identity conflict is another major theme in the literature. Radwan's (2022) case study of rural Egyptian youth found that intense social

media exposure was associated with significant shifts in cultural identity, including the weakening of attachment to traditional values and the adoption of foreign cultural practices. Ogoro et al. (2022), studying bicultural young adults in Ireland, highlight the psychological complexity of navigating multiple cultural identity frames simultaneously—a challenge that social media intensifies by continuously presenting competing cultural representations. Nugraeni (2024) observes that Indonesian youth are particularly vulnerable to this form of identity conflict, given the tension between the country's rich and diverse local cultures and the dominance of global (largely Western and East Asian) cultural content on mainstream social media platforms.

### 3.5 Mediating Factors: Critical Digital Literacy and Cultural Education

A consistent theme across the literature is the protective and enabling role of critical digital literacy in shaping how young people engage with cultural representations on social media. Critical digital literacy—defined as the capacity to analyze, evaluate, and respond reflectively to digital content, including its cultural assumptions and power dynamics—emerges as a key mediating variable between social media exposure and identity outcomes (Echesony, 2024; Varghese, 2025; Yao, 2025).

Studies demonstrate that young people who possess higher levels of critical media literacy are better equipped to resist homogenizing cultural pressures, maintain positive cultural identity, and engage productively with cross-cultural content (Ahamed et al., 2024; Radwan, 2022; Avci et al., 2024). Conversely, young people with limited critical literacy skills are more vulnerable to the negative effects of idealized representations and cultural homogenization. This finding aligns with the broader literature on media literacy education, which positions critical engagement as a foundational competency for healthy digital citizenship.

Family and community support are also identified as important protective factors. Multiple studies report that young people whose families actively discuss and affirm local cultural values are better able to maintain coherent and positive cultural identities in the face of globalizing digital pressures (Echesony, 2024; Nugraeni, 2024; Bubshait, 2025). Educational institutions that integrate culturally grounded content and provide spaces for reflection on digital cultural experiences play a similarly supportive role.

**Table 2. Perbandingan Dampak Positif dan Negatif Representasi Budaya di Media Sosial terhadap Konstruksi Identitas Generasi Muda**

Aspek	Dampak Positif (+)	Dampak Negatif (-)
<b>Pembentukan Identitas</b>	Mendorong eksplorasi identitas yang fleksibel dan otentik (Avci et al., 2024; Budaraga, 2025)	Memicu konflik identitas antara nilai lokal dan global (Echesony, 2024; Ahamed et al., 2024)
<b>Relasi Budaya Lokal</b>	Memperkuat kebanggaan dan solidaritas budaya komunitas (Nugraeni, 2024; Varghese, 2025)	Mengancam kelestarian nilai dan tradisi lokal akibat homogenisasi (Ogoro et al., 2022; Radwan, 2022)
<b>Koneksi Sosial</b>	Membuka jaringan lintas budaya dan dialog antarkelompok (Yao, 2025; Rawat et al., 2025)	Memfasilitasi perbandingan sosial yang merusak harga diri (Roussou & Papaioannou, 2021)
<b>Representasi Gender</b>	Memberikan ruang ekspresi gender yang lebih beragam	Melanggengkan standar kecantikan dan gender yang

	dan inklusif (Farci & Scarcelli, 2023)	tidak realistis (Farci & Scarcelli, 2023; Muyidi, 2025)
<b>Partisipasi Budaya</b>	Memfasilitasi kreasi dan distribusi konten budaya lokal secara luas (Echesony, 2024; Nurhidayah et al., 2025)	Mendorong konsumsi pasif budaya pop global tanpa refleksi kritis (Aguessy & Fandy, 2025)

Sumber: Sintesis dari berbagai studi empiris (2021–2025)

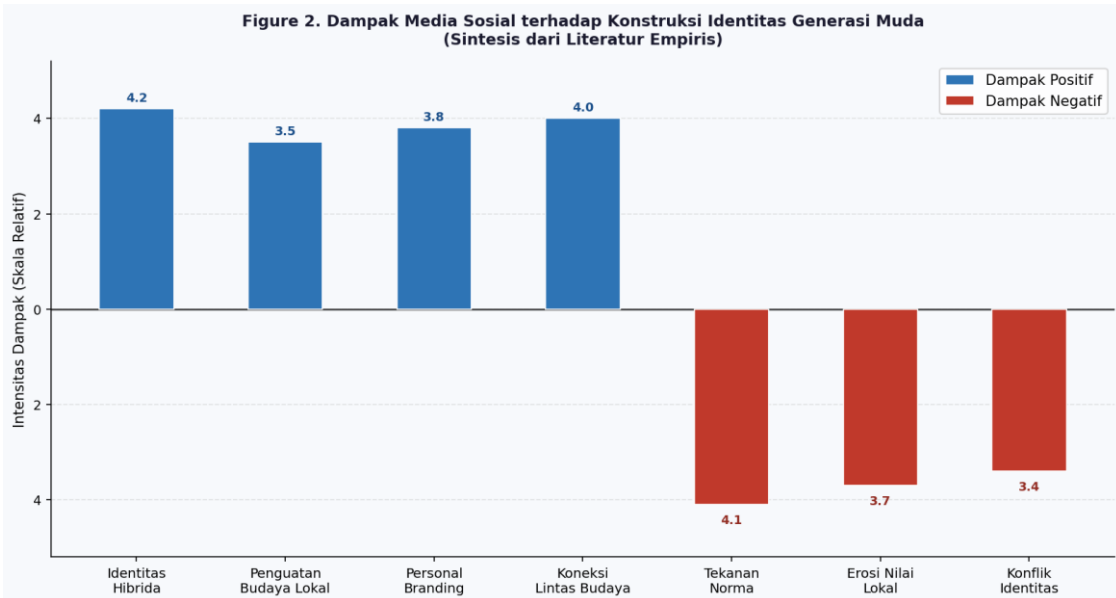


Figure 2. Dampak Media Sosial terhadap Konstruksi Identitas Generasi Muda: Sintesis dari Literatur Empiris (2021–2025)

### 3.6 Integrated Conceptual Framework

Synthesizing the findings across included studies, this review proposes an integrated framework for understanding the relationship between cultural representation on social media and the identity construction of young people. The framework posits three interconnected processes: (1) cultural exposure and encounter, in which young people encounter diverse cultural representations through algorithmically curated social media feeds; (2) representational engagement, encompassing the active practices through which young people consume, produce, and interact with cultural content; and (3) identity negotiation and formation, the psychological and social processes through which young people integrate, resist, or transform cultural representations in the construction of their self-concept.

These three processes are moderated by individual-level factors—including critical digital literacy, psychological resilience, and pre-existing cultural identity strength—and contextual factors, including family support, cultural education, platform design, and the broader sociocultural context. The framework implies that healthy identity construction in the digital age is neither automatic nor passive, but requires active facilitation through education, community support, and critically reflective engagement with digital cultural content.

A key insight of the framework is that the same social media environment can produce profoundly different identity outcomes depending on the competencies and

support structures available to young users. For well-supported young people with strong critical literacy skills, social media can be a rich resource for identity exploration and cross-cultural connection. For those without these resources, the same environment may constitute a significant risk factor for identity confusion, cultural disorientation, and psychological distress. This finding has direct implications for educational and policy interventions, which must aim not simply to regulate social media use but to equip young people with the skills and support necessary for agentic and reflective cultural engagement.

## **CONCLUSION**

This systematic review has synthesized empirical evidence on cultural representation on social media and its impact on the identity construction of young people across diverse national and cultural contexts. The findings confirm that social media functions as a central arena for the cultural life of the young generation, providing both significant opportunities for creative self-expression, cross-cultural dialogue, and identity exploration, and significant risks related to normative pressure, cultural erosion, and identity conflict. The review's most important conclusion is that the identity effects of social media cultural representation are neither uniformly positive nor uniformly negative, but deeply dependent on the mediating role of critical digital literacy, cultural education, family support, and contextual factors. This finding challenges both simplistic techno-optimist narratives—which present social media as a straightforwardly liberating force for identity expression—and techno-pessimist frameworks that treat social media primarily as a threat to authentic identity and cultural heritage.

The integrated conceptual framework proposed in this review offers a theoretically grounded and empirically supported model for understanding how cultural representation, identity formation, and contextual moderators interact in the social media environments inhabited by young people today. This framework has direct applications for school counseling, digital literacy education, cultural policy, and platform governance. For educational practitioners and policymakers, the review's findings underscore the urgency of developing and implementing critically-oriented digital literacy curricula that prepare young people to engage reflectively with cultural representations on social media. Such curricula should be culturally grounded, addressing the specific tensions and opportunities faced by young people in their local cultural contexts, rather than adopting generic frameworks imported from other cultural settings. Family engagement and community-based cultural education initiatives are essential complements to school-based programs.

Future research should prioritize longitudinal studies that track how social media's influence on cultural identity evolves over the course of adolescent development, as well as experimental and intervention studies that test the effectiveness of specific digital literacy and counseling approaches in promoting healthy identity construction. Greater attention to intersectionality—examining how gender, ethnicity, class, and disability interact with social media cultural representation in shaping identity outcomes—is also urgently needed.

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