

Preserving local identity in digital age: A study on local identity in digital spaces of East Nusa Tenggara teenagers

Maxymilianus Soter Mite Kombong ^{①✉}, Mentari Putri Pramanenda Sinaga ^②,
Arnoldus Freinademetz Teda ^③

^{①②③} Politeknik Negeri Kupang, Kupang, Indonesia

[✉] soterkombong@gmail.com

Abstract

This research is qualitative research on local identity of the East Nusa Tenggara Teenagers in digital spaces. It aims to examine how East Nusa Tenggara Teenagers preserve their local identity in digital platforms. Cultural Identity Theory (CIT) is used to explore how participants shape their identity in digital communication. There are ten teenagers participated in this research. In-depth interview was conducted to get a deep understanding. The research finds that East Nusa Tenggara Teenagers have a good linguistics awareness when interact to others through digital platforms. A positive attitude by the East Nusa Tenggara Teenagers toward local culture in digital spaces is also occurred in this research. Local values and norms are also can be integrated through digital spaces. The result of this research suggests implication for future research of how local culture and digital spaces can integrate each other.

Keywords

identity, digital age, cultural identity theory

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Introduction

In general, identity refers to the characteristics such as language, culture, tradition, or values that make the members of a community belong to each other. Identity makes the members of a community understand who they are in society. Identity in some way is not possessed by the members since they were born. It is shaped by the social interaction. It means that identity is stable but shaped by social interaction. It is as Hall (1996) argues that identity is not a fixed essence, but always developed through the process of human lives. The rise of digital platforms such as social media in recent decades brings a new horizon on how people especially teens express themselves. The find new way on how to see themselves as an individual or member of society. Teens are passionate about finding their place in society. What is different as a result of social media is that teens' persistent desire for social connection and autonomy is now being expressed in networked publics. The rapid development of digital platforms makes community have to reinterpret identity and maintain the local values (Putri et al., 2024)

Identity refers to the attributes, convictions, personality traits, outward manifestations, and/or expressions that define a person or a group. The importance of identity is covered by the notion of having an identity can help you feel like you belong to somewhere or something, which seems to be crucial for your confidence and well-being. Language, especially speech, exposes the identity of a particular person, be it on an individual level or in-group (Sabri, et al., 2022).

Preserving ethnic identity in digital age looks more challenging nowadays when exchanges of cultures in digital platforms can be done instantly; leaving us in un-barrier world. It is as Levin & Mamlok (2021) stated the term "transparisation" as one of the new trends of digital society's culture. This world in some cases becomes more inclusive when digital platforms spread many contents throughout the digital worldwide that can be accessed instantly by the digital society. It means that the exchange of information, culture, events, or ideology are rapidly occurred. One community can interact with others though they have different language and culture directly or indirectly through the digital platforms. This situation brings new challenges for preserving local identity and culture.

Cultural Identity Theory (CIT), developed by Mary Jane Collier and Milt Thomas, explains how people form, express, and negotiate their cultural identities through communication. The theory suggests that cultural identity is not fixed, but dynamic and relational, shaped by interactions with others and influenced by social structures like power, history, and context. CIT highlights that individuals have multiple cultural identities (such as ethnicity, gender, nationality), and these identities become more or less important depending on the situation. Communication plays a key role in affirming, challenging, or transforming cultural identities, especially in intercultural encounters.

The challenges occur when members of a community face a collide side between offline and online identity when they get into digital platforms. Many scholars study this phenomenon such as how students deploy online (MSN Messenger) and offline activity frames in identity performances (Aarsand, 2008), how social media effect the Indonesian teenagers' self-perception and establishment of identity (Regita et al., 2024), or how social media shapes Gen Z identity (Ananda et al., 2024).

Identity faces more challenges in this digital age. Social media that rapidly becomes trend of teens' life brings challenge to preserving identity. The literature indicates that while digital identity offers opportunities for self-expression and community building, it also raises concerns about authenticity, privacy, and the potential for identity fragmentation. The role of social media in shaping identity highlights the importance of digital literacy and the need for policies that protect users' online privacy and identity.

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The question is how the young generation preserve their identity and culture as member of a community in this digital age. The challenges faced by young people in Indonesia context are becoming more complex as digital platforms rapidly developed. Along with the rise of digital activities, young people are challenged to preserve their local identity. Indonesia, as an archipelagic country, has a variety of different cultures and languages. This diversity occurs in Indonesia archipelago.

East Nusa Tenggara is one of province in Indonesia. It is located in the eastern part of Indonesia archipelago and consists of thousands island. East Nusa Tenggarans recognize themselves and being recognized by others as eastern people. These eastern people have their own characteristics. This research aims to investigate how young generation of East Nusa Tenggarans preserve their identity in this digital age.

Method

This research uses a qualitative method which aims to investigate how East Nusa Tenggara teenagers' experiences in preserving their local identity on digital platforms. It is also to find out the challenges and opportunities that teenagers face to preserve their local identity when they use social media platform. By using Cultural Identity Theory (CIT), this research aims to explore how teenagers shape their identity in digital communication. This qualitative approach is suitable for getting a deep understanding of the phenomenon. In-depth interview from several focus group discussions were conducted to collect information concerned to the topic of this research. A phenomenological design was used to capture participants' personal experiences. In-depth interviews were chosen because they enable rich, detailed accounts of individuals' perceptions and emotions related to the phenomenon. Open ended questions are used to give the participants flexible responses. Purposive sampling is used to choose participants who suitable for this research. There are ten teenagers that participated in this research who have the same level of education and age in average. They also belong to the same speech community, culture, and identity. The collected information from in-depth interview is taken into transcription. The next step is text segmentation, labeling and coding for description and analyzing.

Results

The amount of digital activity that participants experienced such as scrolling *Tiktok*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and other social media is considered high every day. The following table shows the amount of time participants spent on accessing social media.

The Amount of Time Participants Spent on Social Media	Number of Participants
1-2 hours/day	1
3-4 Hours/day	4
> 5 hours/day	5

The table shows that most of participants are active on digital platforms. They interact directly or indirectly with other digital society. The participants' response on question "what language do you use when you interact with other people on social media" shows the maturity of the participants to switch their language dialect between Bahasa and their local dialect or local language.

P1 Response

It depends on what content that I get into. If the content is about national issue, then I use Bahasa. If the content is about local issue, I use my dialect.

P2 Response

I use my local language when I comment on videos or picture that present my hometown because I feel more comfortable if I use my local language.

The responses indicate the participants' maturity to choose appropriate language that they use when they get into interaction on digital platform. The confidence they have when use local dialect and language shows that the participants have a strong bond to their local identity. The participants demonstrate the emotional and cultural value of their identity as member of community. They can maintain themselves as members of digital society without losing their local characteristics in term of the use of language. It means that the participants have a high level of linguistics awareness, adapting to the context of communication in digital spaces. This suggests that rather than being replaced, local languages are being strategically integrated into digital interactions as symbols of identity and belonging.

In term of attitude toward local and cultural content on social media, the participants show positive attitude in integrating local content and social media.

P3 Response

I like to post and sometimes repost photos or videos about traditional ceremonies in my village. I think it's important for young generation to know and be proud of our culture, even if we use social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or Facebook.

P4 Response

Sometimes I have a doubt to post local cultural content because I'm afraid people will think it's old-fashioned. But when I see others appreciate it, I feel proud and want to share more.

P5 Response

Yes, I have posted some pictures of me wearing my traditional clothes. Sometimes, I use it as my profile picture or just post on my wall. I am proud to post it when I use my traditional clothes.

The participants' responses indicate an increased awareness of the role of social media in promoting local culture. There is a sense of pride and responsibility in preserving cultural identity through digital content such as pictures or videos. The participants are able to see social media as a tool for cultural promotion and appreciation, especially among the young generation. In promoting cultural content in social media, there is still a pressure to fight against stigmatization on old-fashioned surrounding the digital spaces. There is still a space for negotiating modern and traditional culture in digital platforms. Despite that, there is still a chance when the participants see that many digital societies appreciate traditional content. This can reinforce cultural pride and confidence. It is also interesting when it comes to promote traditional content such as traditional clothes. The response also suggests that there is a pride of the participants to express themselves wearing their traditional outfit. The responses suggest that participants perceive social media as both a platform for cultural expression and a space of negotiation between modern trends and local identity. Their willingness to share cultural content online demonstrates that digital platforms can support the continuity of local traditions.

The next is how local values adapted to digital interaction. The responses suggest that local values can be integrated when getting into digital interaction.

P6 Response

In my community, we have to be polite and respectful when we talk to others especially the elder ones. I try to apply the same attitude when I comment on social media posts or reply to messages, even if I disagree with someone.

P7 Response

My parents often remind me to keep our local values, like mutual cooperation. So when I see a fundraising post for people in need, I try to share or donate. For me, helping others online is also part of that value.

It can be seen that the participants are able to interpret their local value in digital space. Their statements illustrate the value that they practice when they interact with other digital societies such as the value of being polite and respectful to the others. These values are local values living in everyday life of Indonesians' life in general and East Nusa Tenggara in particular. It means that digital spaces do not necessarily erode cultural values, but digital spaces can be the virtual world where norms and values can be applied. It is also the digital spaces where participants show their empathy to the people in need. Digital spaces bring a new form of local norms and values expression. It indicates that the participants are in adaptive process to negotiate local identity and digital spaces.

Based on the responses stated above, digital platforms where participants express themselves in online community do not passively affect participants, rather they can integrate the local values with digital platforms. The findings suggest that East Nusa Tenggara Teenagers are able to maintain their local identity while engaging with global digital practices.

Discussion

The findings of this research highlight the ability of the participants to negotiate their local identity and their activities in digital platforms. It can be seen from the responses that indicate the participants are not passive user of digital platform. They perform the ability to integrate their linguistic, cultural, and values in digital spaces. The findings support the notion "cultural hybridity" (Bhabha, 1994) indicate that local and global identities can negotiate and influence one another.

In term of language use, the findings show a high level of linguistic awareness performing by the participants to adapt the contextual features when they interact in digital spaces. The switching between Bahasa and local language or dialect represents the ability of the participants to express digital literacy and cultural sensitivity. This is supported by the previous research that highlight the multilingual practice on online settings as a form of identity performance (Androutsopoulos, 2015). The participants' confidence when using local dialect or language demonstrate a strong emotional attachment to their local identity, demonstrating that digital platform can serve as a space for promoting local identity.

In regards to attitudes toward local culture, the participants use social media platforms to promote and preserve local cultural traditions. The challenge exists when the teenagers face a collide side of being afraid to be called old fashion and the moral responsibility to preserve local identity in digital platform, a phenomenon that also observed in digital youth culture (Miller, et al., 2016). Despite of being hesitate to express local identity, it is found that the emotional belonging of local identity is still on high level. The confidence of the participants to post an image of themselves wearing traditional clothes indicates strong connection to the culture. It becomes one of the most simple and powerful way to express the local identity as East Nusa Tenggara.

The study also finds that local values and traditions are not disappearing in the digital era; instead, they are being adapted to fit online contexts. Values such as *politeness*, *respect*, and mutual cooperation are displayed through online behaviors like maintaining respectful communication and participating in digital acts of solidarity, including sharing information and engaging in charitable activities. This adaptation process reflects what (Pérez-Torres, 2024) study on how social media mirror for identity development.

Overall, the findings suggest that the digital era does not inherently threaten local identity. On the contrary, it opens new avenues for cultural continuity and transformation. Through conscious engagement and creative adaptation, individuals are able to sustain their cultural essence while participating fully in the global digital society. Hence, rather than viewing technology as a source of cultural loss, it should be understood as a potential medium for cultural resilience and identity negotiation. The findings show that Cultural Identity Theory is relevant to the participants experiences in digital communication. They demonstrate the ability to adapt to the context of communication and shift their identity based on appropriate situation.

Conclusion

This research has examined how East Nusa Tenggara Teenagers preserve and maintain their local identity in digital age. The findings shows that teenagers can be the agent of preserving local identity in this digital age where the rapid growth of digital activities. Digital platforms can be the media for expressing identities, culture and values. The research also shows a good linguistics awareness that participants demonstrate. Digital platform can be the media of identity development for young generation.

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