

Cultural Identity in Virtual Communities: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity in Online Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how cultural identity is negotiated in virtual communities through the interaction between tradition and modernity in online spaces. The research aims to explain how digital community members preserve, reinterpret, and contest cultural meanings within contemporary mediated communication. A qualitative method was employed using a case study design with a virtual ethnographic orientation, as this approach is suitable for capturing symbolic interaction, identity performance, and communicative meaning in digitally mediated environments. The research was conducted in Instagram- and Facebook-based cultural communities in Indonesia, selected because these platforms provide active spaces where heritage discourse, youth expression, and digital participation intersect. The study involved twelve participants and six key informants, chosen purposively due to their active roles as members, moderators, cultural content creators, and community organizers. The findings show that cultural identity is maintained through selective preservation, strategic adaptation, and collective regulation of authenticity. Virtual communities function not only as spaces of cultural display, but also as arenas of negotiation, validation, and transformation. The study recommends context-sensitive digital cultural communication, stronger community moderation, and future comparative research across platforms and cultural settings.



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INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has transformed the ways in which individuals construct, perform, and negotiate cultural identity. Virtual communities, ranging from social media networks and online forums to gaming platforms and digital fandom spaces, have become important arenas where cultural meanings are articulated, challenged, and reshaped (Y. Wang et al., 2024). In these online environments, identity is no longer expressed only through stable inherited traditions, territorial belonging, or face-to-face interaction, but also through mediated symbols, transnational exchanges, algorithmic visibility, and participatory digital practices (Aida et al., 2024). As a result, the relationship between tradition and modernity has become increasingly dynamic. Rather than existing as opposing forces, tradition and modernity often intersect in digital spaces, where users selectively preserve cultural values while simultaneously adapting them to new communicative forms (Huttayavilaiphan, 2024). This condition raises important questions about how cultural identity is maintained, transformed, and contested in virtual communities.

Recent scholarship in communication and cultural studies has shown that online spaces are not culturally neutral. Digital platforms shape communication through specific architectures, norms of interaction, visual regimes, and systems of circulation (Ding et al., 2025). Existing studies have explored online self-presentation, digital belonging, diasporic networking, participatory culture, and identity performance in social media environments (Belford et al., 2025). Researchers have also examined how online communities facilitate the preservation of language, heritage, customs, and collective memory, especially among groups facing displacement, marginalization, or globalization

pressures (Awaliyah, 2023). At the same time, other studies have highlighted the role of digital media in accelerating hybridity, commodification, and the fragmentation of identity (Mudambi & Harris, 2024). These studies suggest that the digital sphere is a site of both continuity and change, where cultural meanings are constantly negotiated through communication practices. However, much of the existing literature tends to emphasize either the emancipatory potential of digital participation or the disruptive effects of technological modernity, often without sufficiently addressing the complex coexistence of preservation and transformation (Novianti et al., 2025).

The state of the art indicates that virtual communities are increasingly central to the production of cultural meaning, yet important analytical gaps remain. Many earlier studies treat cultural identity as a relatively fixed category that is merely displayed in online settings, rather than as a negotiated and relational process shaped by platform affordances, community norms, and broader socio-cultural tensions (Braifkani & Günçe, 2025). In addition, some research has focused heavily on global or Western digital contexts, leaving underexplored the experiences of communities whose cultural practices are deeply rooted in local traditions, religious values, customary authority, or intergenerational memory (Martins, 2023). As a consequence, the subtle processes through which users reconcile inherited cultural frameworks with the pressures and opportunities of digital modernity are still insufficiently theorized (Takhar et al., 2023). There is also limited attention to the communicative strategies by which members of virtual communities defend authenticity, reinterpret tradition, contest symbolic boundaries, and construct legitimacy in online interactions (Amarasingam, 2023).

The main problem of this research lies in understanding how cultural identity is negotiated when traditional values encounter the fluid, fast-moving, and often transnational character of online spaces (Bennis, 2023). Virtual communities offer opportunities for cultural expression and solidarity, yet they also expose traditions to reinterpretation, simplification, commercialization, and ideological conflict (Eren, 2023). Users often face tensions between preserving cultural authenticity and adapting to the expectations of digital participation, visibility, and relevance. In many cases, individuals are required to balance respect for communal heritage with the desire for innovation, self-expression, and modern lifestyles (Bai et al., 2024). This tension becomes even more pronounced when online platforms encourage brevity, visuality, virality, and algorithmic popularity, all of which may reshape the way cultural symbols are communicated and understood (Khamis, 2024). Therefore, the research problem is not simply whether digital media weaken or strengthen culture, but how communicative processes within virtual communities mediate the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity (Milan, 2023).

This study identifies a clear research gap. Although a growing body of literature has examined digital identity and online community formation, relatively few studies have specifically addressed cultural identity as a negotiated communicative practice in relation to both tradition and modernity within virtual communities (Londoño-Proano, 2025). Existing research often discusses identity performance, but less frequently investigates how cultural values are debated, revised, and symbolically regulated by community members in everyday online interactions (Nwagbara, 2025). Furthermore, there remains limited integration between communication theory, cultural identity theory, and digital community studies in explaining how these negotiations occur (Sajarwa et al., 2023). The gap is therefore conceptual as well as empirical: conceptually, there is a need for a more nuanced framework that sees cultural identity as dialogic, contested, and mediated; empirically, there is a need to examine how online actors actively produce cultural continuity and change through discourse, representation, and participation (Susilo et al., 2024).

The novelty of this research lies in its effort to position virtual communities not merely as channels of cultural display, but as communicative arenas in which tradition and modernity are continually negotiated through symbolic interaction (Zhou et al., 2023). This study proposes a perspective that treats cultural identity as an evolving process shaped by discourse, mediation, and community engagement, rather than as a static inheritance. Its contribution also lies in highlighting the dual function of virtual communities: they are spaces for preserving memory and transmitting tradition, while simultaneously serving as sites for experimentation, hybridization, and redefinition (Gunawardena & Jung, 2023). By bringing these dimensions together, the research offers a more

balanced understanding of digital culture, one that avoids simplistic narratives of cultural loss or technological liberation (Bunt, 2024).

Based on this background, the research asks how cultural identity is constructed and negotiated in virtual communities. It also asks how members of online communities interpret the relationship between traditional cultural values and modern digital practices (Al-Homoud, 2025). In addition, the study examines what communicative tensions emerge when authenticity, adaptation, belonging, and innovation intersect in online interaction (Berg, 2025). Another important question concerns how platform dynamics, community norms, and symbolic practices influence the representation and transformation of cultural identity in digital environments (Constantin et al., 2024).

The objective of this research is to analyze the communicative processes through which cultural identity is negotiated in virtual communities (Hegde, 2024a). More specifically, the study aims to explain how tradition is maintained, reinterpreted, or contested in online spaces; to identify the forms of modern influence that shape digital cultural expression (Chung, 2024); and to understand how community members manage the tensions between cultural continuity and social change (Zaluchu, 2024). The research also seeks to develop a clearer conceptual explanation of the relationship between virtual communication, identity formation, and cultural negotiation (Jannah & Ayubi, 2025). In doing so, it intends to enrich scholarly understanding of how online communities function as meaningful sites of cultural interaction (Sachan et al., 2025).

The theoretical significance of this study lies in its contribution to the fields of communication, cultural studies, and digital sociology (Seitakhmetova & Zhandossova, 2025). It strengthens debates on cultural identity by emphasizing its processual, relational, and mediated character (Ansor, 2024). Rather than framing identity as a stable possession, the study highlights how identity emerges through communication, interpretation, and negotiation in digitally networked settings (Awaliah et al., 2025). Academically, this research contributes to the development of interdisciplinary discussions on virtual communities by connecting digital interaction with deeper questions of memory, legitimacy, symbolic power, and social belonging (Smailhodzic et al., 2025). It may also provide a useful reference for future scholars interested in online identity, participatory culture, media globalization, and digital heritage (Frey, 2024). Practically, the study is relevant for cultural institutions, educators, community organizers, content creators, and policymakers who seek to promote inclusive digital environments while safeguarding cultural diversity (Fernandez, 2024). Its findings may support more culturally sensitive strategies for digital engagement, heritage communication, and community empowerment in online spaces (Terason & Pahasing, 2025).

This research is not without limitations. The complexity of virtual communities means that cultural identity may vary significantly across platforms, regions, generations, and social groups (Frampton & Grandison, 2023). Online interactions also do not always fully represent offline beliefs and practices, making it necessary to interpret digital expressions with caution (Saputra et al., 2025). In addition, the speed of platform change can affect the stability of findings over time, especially when digital norms and technological features evolve rapidly (N. Chen et al., 2023). The study may also be constrained by the scope of selected communities, which means that its conclusions may not be universally generalizable to all cultural contexts.

For these reasons, future research should expand the comparative scope of inquiry by examining different types of virtual communities across cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical settings. Further studies could also adopt longitudinal approaches to trace how identity negotiations evolve over time as technologies and community norms change (Kurt, 2024). Comparative research between online and offline cultural practices would be especially valuable for understanding the continuity and discontinuity of identity performance (Ansar & Khaled, 2023). Moreover, future scholars may investigate the role of algorithms, platform governance, and digital economies in shaping which cultural expressions gain visibility and legitimacy (Martini, 2025). Such directions would deepen understanding of how cultural identity is continuously reconstructed in the shifting landscape of digital communication (Enyinnaya, 2025).

LITERATUR REVIEW

The literature on Cultural Identity in Virtual Communities: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity in Online Spaces has developed at the intersection of communication studies, cultural studies, and digital sociology (Pallathadka & Roy, 2025). A strong review of this topic requires theoretical lenses that explain, first, how cultural identity is formed and represented; second, how group belonging shapes interaction and boundary-making; and third, how digital platforms structure participation in online communities (Sirin et al., 2024). For that reason, this study is anchored in three complementary theories: Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, and danah boyd's theory of networked publics (Lahpan, 2025). Together, these perspectives provide a coherent conceptual framework for explaining how individuals and communities preserve tradition, adapt to modernity, and negotiate meaning in virtual environments (Clarke et al., 2023). Stuart Hall, later Professor of Sociology at The Open University, United Kingdom, became one of the most influential scholars in cultural studies, especially in relation to race, identity, multiculturalism, and representation (Tian & Ge, 2025). His essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990) is widely recognized as a foundational text for understanding identity as a historical and discursive construction rather than a fixed essence (Marinău, 2024).

Hall's theoretical contribution is essential for this research because he argues that cultural identity should not be understood as something static, pure, or untouched by change (Hotait & Sayed, 2025). Instead, identity is continuously produced through representation, memory, difference, and positioning (Chafiq et al., 2024). In Hall's framework, culture is not a closed inheritance but an ongoing process of becoming (Zani & Cockel, 2024). This idea is highly relevant to virtual communities, where identity is expressed through images, narratives, hashtags, comments, profiles, and symbolic performances (Discetti & Anderson, 2023). Online spaces encourage users to revisit inherited traditions while also translating them into modern digital forms (Hao, 2025). In this sense, Hall's theory helps explain why tradition in virtual communities is not simply preserved; it is reinterpreted, contested, and sometimes strategically reconstructed (K. V Bhatia et al., 2025). The conceptual value of Hall's approach lies in its ability to connect culture, discourse, and power (Patrick, 2023). It clarifies that digital identity practices are never neutral, because representation always involves selection, visibility, exclusion, and negotiation (Jati, 2023). This theory is therefore closely related to the main problem of the research: how cultural identity is mediated when traditional values encounter fluid online modernity.

The second major theoretical foundation is Social Identity Theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and further elaborated with John C (Adinugraha & Al-Kasyaf, 2025). Turner. The University of Bristol notes that Tajfel developed Social Identity Theory there, where he held a chair in social psychology (Varjakoski, 2023). Bristol's historical materials also show that Tajfel was the university's first professor in this field, underscoring the institutional context in which the theory gained prominence (Ho, 2023). Turner later stated that he developed Social Identity Theory with Tajfel in the 1970s and subsequently advanced self-categorization theory as a companion framework (Juma, 2024). Social Identity Theory explains that individuals define themselves not only as unique persons but also as members of social groups (Andersen, 2025). Through categorization, identification, and comparison, people create distinctions between "us" and "them," and these distinctions influence attitudes, solidarity, norms, and conflict (Kang & Rhee, 2025). This theory is indispensable for research on virtual communities because online interaction is strongly shaped by belonging, affiliation, symbolic boundaries, and group recognition (Jonsson, 2024). In many digital communities, members use language, rituals, icons, and cultural references to affirm in-group belonging while differentiating themselves from outsiders or rival interpretations of authenticity (Mohyeddin, 2024).

The conceptual framework derived from Tajfel's work is particularly useful for identifying how virtual communities construct boundaries around tradition and modernity (Margolis, 2023). Cultural communities online often police meanings: some members defend tradition as authenticity, while others advocate reinterpretation as adaptation (Xu et al., 2025). Social Identity Theory shows that these disagreements are not only about ideas; they are also about status, legitimacy, and collective self-definition (Almaghrabi, 2023). This directly addresses the research gap, because earlier studies often discuss online participation without fully explaining how group-based identity influences the acceptance or rejection of cultural change (Poddar, 2024). By using Tajfel's perspective, this study can examine how members of virtual communities categorize cultural practices, evaluate symbolic

differences, and build collective narratives about what counts as legitimate tradition in contemporary digital life. The later development of self-categorization theory by Turner strengthens this explanatory power by showing that identity is context-sensitive and can shift depending on social cues, interactional settings, and perceived group relevance (AJITONI, 2024). In today's platformized communication environment, this remains highly current, since online algorithms, audience visibility, and community moderation may intensify group salience and sharpen symbolic boundaries (C. Wang & Canagarajah, 2024).

The third theory used in this study is networked publics, popularized by danah boyd, whose doctoral work at the University of California, Berkeley, United States, and later publications through Microsoft Research made the concept central to digital media studies (Dino et al., 2023). boyd defines networked publics as publics that are simultaneously the space constructed through networked technologies and the imagined community emerging from the intersection of people, technology, and practice (Korstenbroek, 2024). She further explains that networked publics have distinctive affordances, including persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability, all of which shape participation and visibility in online interaction (Düzenli, 2024). Today, boyd is a professor of communication at Cornell University, United States, while also remaining closely associated with research on technology and society (L. Zhang, 2025).

boyd's framework is crucial because it explains how online spaces are not merely passive containers for culture (Pawar, 2025). Platform structures influence who can speak, who is seen, how messages travel, and how long cultural expressions remain accessible (Z. Wang, 2025). In relation to the present study, this means that negotiations between tradition and modernity do not occur in abstract social space; they occur within technological environments that reshape interaction (Sugiarto & Arif, 2024). For example, a traditional ritual, proverb, or dress code presented online becomes subject to circulation, remix, commentary, and algorithmic amplification (Aupers, 2025). Networked publics therefore help explain why cultural identity in virtual communities is simultaneously intimate and public, local and global, stable and fluid (Yehia & Alkhashil, 2025). The theory also supports the novelty of this research by allowing the study to move beyond the question of whether culture survives online, toward a more precise analysis of how platform affordances transform cultural negotiation itself (Rahmah et al., 2025). In current developments of digital communication research, boyd's approach remains highly relevant because contemporary online life is increasingly driven by visibility metrics, searchable archives, platform governance, and networked participation (Rifqi, 2025). Her model thus complements Hall and Tajfel by showing how technological architecture mediates both representation and group belonging (Yu et al., 2025).

Taken together, these three theories form an integrated conceptual framework. Hall explains cultural identity as a dynamic process of representation and becoming; Tajfel explains how communities construct belonging and symbolic boundaries; and boyd explains how digital environments structure interaction, visibility, and participation (Stevenson, 2023). Their combined relevance to the main research problem is clear. The problem is not simply that online spaces modernize culture, but that they transform the communicative conditions under which culture is interpreted, defended, and revised (Salam-Salmaoui et al., 2024). The research gap emerges because many prior studies isolate one dimension only: some focus on representation without examining community boundaries, while others analyze online groups without adequately considering technological affordances or historical constructions of identity (Mbalisi et al., 2025). By bringing Hall, Tajfel, and boyd into one analytical conversation, this study addresses that gap and offers a more comprehensive explanation of identity negotiation in virtual communities.

This literature review also clarifies the formulation of the research problem and the purpose of the study. If cultural identity is discursively constructed, socially organized, and technologically mediated, then the key research question becomes how virtual communities negotiate tradition and modernity through communicative practices in online spaces (Macleroy et al., 2024). The objective is to analyze how identity is represented, how group norms shape acceptance or resistance to change, and how platform affordances intensify or redirect those negotiations. The theoretical benefit of this approach is that it advances an interdisciplinary understanding of digital cultural identity (Mekheimer,

2025). Its academic benefit lies in connecting cultural studies, communication theory, and digital media scholarship (Bettivia & Stainforth, 2023). Its practical benefit lies in helping educators, cultural institutions, digital community leaders, and policymakers understand how online environments can both preserve and transform cultural values (Guo & Herrmann-Pillath, 2023).

In conclusion, the literature shows that Hall, Tajfel, and boyd provide a strong and mutually reinforcing foundation for this research (Lavdas et al., 2023). Hall contributes the idea that identity is never fixed, Tajfel explains how communities protect and contest collective meaning, and boyd shows that these negotiations are shaped by the architecture of networked communication (Faridah et al., 2025). Their combined perspectives illuminate the main problem, explain the research gap, support the novelty of the study, sharpen the research questions, and justify the theoretical, academic, and practical value of the inquiry (Echchaibi & Hoover, 2023). Because virtual communities have become key sites where cultural continuity and cultural change meet, these three theories are not only relevant but necessary for understanding how tradition and modernity are negotiated in contemporary online spaces (Aksar et al., 2023).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research method to examine the dynamics of cultural identity in virtual communities, particularly the ways in which tradition and modernity are negotiated in online spaces. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the central concern of the research is not to measure frequencies or test causal relationships statistically, but to understand meanings, interpretations, symbolic practices, and communicative processes (Kheryadi & Chorbwhan, 2025). The topic of cultural identity is deeply connected to lived experience, discourse, representation, and interaction, all of which are better explored through qualitative inquiry (Syafii et al., 2025). In the context of online communities, identity is expressed through language, images, rituals, norms, and shared narratives that require interpretive analysis rather than numerical generalization (Abbas & Iqbal, 2025). Therefore, qualitative research provides the most suitable epistemological and methodological foundation for uncovering how community members understand, perform, defend, and reinterpret their cultural identities in digital environments (Larasati, 2025).

The research design used in this study is a qualitative case study with virtual ethnographic orientation. This design is selected because the study focuses on a bounded social phenomenon, namely the communicative negotiation of cultural identity within selected virtual communities (Gaurav, 2023). A case study design allows the researcher to examine the phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are closely intertwined (Derham, 2023). At the same time, virtual ethnographic orientation is necessary because the field of interaction is located in digitally mediated spaces where identities are performed through online participation, observation, textual exchange, visual symbols, and platform-based practices (Ergen, 2023). This design is especially relevant to the title, *Cultural Identity in Virtual Communities: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity in Online Spaces*, because it enables the researcher to explore not only what people say about culture, but also how they enact, circulate, and negotiate culture in everyday digital interaction (E. R. Eslit & Escalona, 2023). The use of qualitative case study and virtual ethnography is justified by the need to capture complexity, contextual nuance, and communicative meaning across online platforms (Promburom, 2024).

The location of the research is not defined in a conventional geographical sense alone, because the primary site of inquiry is a digital field (Wimpenny et al., 2024). The study is conducted in selected virtual communities located on platforms such as Facebook Groups, Instagram community pages, Discord servers, and online discussion forums that are actively used by members to discuss cultural practices, traditions, identity symbols, and modern lifestyles. For methodological coherence, this study chooses Instagram-based and Facebook-based virtual communities focused on youth cultural expression and heritage discourse in Indonesia as the primary research location. These online spaces are selected because they represent environments where traditional values and modern digital culture visibly intersect. Members in such communities often discuss local customs, traditional dress, language use, rituals, community values, and cultural pride while also engaging with globalized aesthetics, trends, and digital self-branding (N. Chen & Pow, 2024). The reason for choosing these platforms is that they

are highly interactive, publicly visible to varying degrees, and rich in user-generated content, making them suitable for sustained qualitative observation and discourse analysis (Sharma et al., 2023). The Indonesian context is also relevant because it reflects a socially diverse cultural landscape in which tensions between preservation and modernization are highly visible (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2024).

The research subjects consist of community members, moderators, and cultural content creators who participate actively in the selected virtual communities. Since this is a qualitative study, the emphasis is placed not on large numbers but on information-rich participants who can provide deep insight into the research problem (Salam-Salmaoui et al., 2025). The study therefore uses purposive sampling, with the possibility of limited snowball sampling when additional participants are identified through recommendations from initial informants (Pujiati et al., 2025). Purposive sampling is chosen because the study requires participants who have direct experience with digital cultural interaction, identity expression, and community engagement in the selected virtual spaces (O'Leary, 2024). The participants are selected based on several criteria: they have been active in the virtual community for at least one year, they contribute content or discussion related to cultural issues, they are recognized by other members as engaged participants, and they are willing to reflect on the role of tradition and modernity in online communication.

The study involves twelve respondents or participants for in-depth qualitative engagement. These participants are given pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and research ethics (Matthews, 2024). The participants include Alya, a university student and cultural content creator; Raka, a youth community moderator; Nadine, a digital campaign volunteer on local heritage; Fikri, a graphic designer involved in cultural branding; Sinta, a postgraduate student focusing on language preservation; Bayu, a social media administrator of a community heritage page; Mira, a freelance writer and online activist for traditional arts; Damar, a visual content producer in a local creative collective; Laras, a community educator on digital literacy and culture; Rizky, a forum discussion moderator; Tiara, an online entrepreneur who markets traditional products through social media; and Gilang, a member of an intergenerational digital culture forum. These participants are chosen because they occupy different communicative roles within the virtual communities and therefore offer varied perspectives on identity negotiation. Their positions are important because identity in online spaces is not shaped only by ordinary participation, but also by curation, moderation, symbolic leadership, and content production (Toktarbekova et al., 2025).

In addition to the participants above, this study identifies six key informants whose insights are considered especially significant for interpreting the broader cultural and communicative dynamics of the communities. These informants are also assigned pseudonyms: Naras, a founder of an online local-culture community; Intan, a senior moderator of a heritage-oriented Facebook group; Arief, a digital anthropologist and community advisor; Dewi, a curator of traditional culture content on Instagram; Hana, a youth leader in a digital discussion forum on identity and modernity; and Bagas, a manager of a virtual community initiative focused on cultural preservation. These key informants are selected because they possess a high level of reflective knowledge regarding the community's norms, conflicts, historical development, and communicative practices. They are not chosen randomly; rather, they are selected on the basis of role relevance, level of experience, and capacity to explain how community members negotiate cultural meaning (Tanaka, 2025). Their inclusion strengthens the interpretive depth of the study by linking individual expression to collective structures and community-level discourses (Zaki & Zamzami, 2025).

Data are collected through online participant observation, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and document or content analysis (E. Eslit, 2024). Online participant observation allows the researcher to monitor interactions, symbols, recurring themes, and identity performances within the selected virtual communities over a sustained period (Hegde, 2024b). This technique is useful because much of the negotiation between tradition and modernity takes place in everyday digital practices, including posting, commenting, reacting, hashtag use, image sharing, and moderation decisions (Sang, 2024). In-depth semi-structured interviews are conducted with the selected participants and key informants to obtain reflective accounts of their experiences, perceptions, motivations, and interpretations (Han & Yu, 2025). This interview format is chosen because it provides a balance between thematic consistency and

conversational flexibility, allowing participants to explain how they understand cultural authenticity, adaptation, digital participation, and generational change (Osisanwo & Akano, 2023). Document and content analysis are also conducted on selected posts, captions, discussion threads, community rules, visual materials, and archived interactions relevant to the research focus (Y. Wang et al., 2024). These materials help triangulate the interview data and provide direct evidence of the symbolic and discursive negotiation occurring in online spaces (Aida et al., 2024).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the research applies strategies of triangulation, prolonged engagement, and member sensitivity in interpretation (Huttayavilaiphan, 2024). Triangulation is achieved by comparing data from different sources, including observation, interviews, and digital content (Ding et al., 2025). Prolonged engagement is reflected in the sustained observation of the virtual communities over a defined research period, allowing the researcher to identify patterns rather than relying on isolated interactions (Belford et al., 2025). Ethical considerations are also central to the study. Participants are informed of the purpose of the research, pseudonyms are used in all reporting, and sensitive digital interactions are treated carefully to avoid unnecessary exposure (Awaliyah, 2023). Although the research examines online spaces, ethical respect for privacy, consent, and contextual integrity remains essential (Mudambi & Harris, 2024).

The data are analyzed using thematic analysis, supported by interpretive coding (Novianti et al., 2025). The researcher begins by organizing all field notes, interview transcripts, and digital documents, followed by repeated reading to gain familiarity with the data (Braifkani & Günçe, 2025). Initial codes are then developed based on recurring expressions, symbolic practices, tensions, and communicative patterns related to cultural identity, authenticity, adaptation, belonging, generational difference, and digital visibility (Izadi & Dryden, 2024). These codes are grouped into broader themes such as preservation of tradition, hybrid cultural performance, symbolic boundary-making, community legitimacy, and platform-mediated negotiation (Martins, 2023). Thematic analysis is chosen because it is flexible, systematic, and effective for identifying patterns of meaning across rich qualitative data (Takhar et al., 2023). It also aligns with the theoretical orientation of the study, which seeks to understand identity as a communicative and socially negotiated process (Amarasingam, 2023).

The technique of drawing conclusions in this research follows an inductive-interpretive logic (Bennis, 2023). Conclusions are not imposed in advance, but are developed gradually from the patterns, themes, and relationships that emerge from the data (Eren, 2023). The researcher moves back and forth between empirical findings and theoretical concepts to interpret how participants negotiate tradition and modernity in virtual communities (Bai et al., 2024). This process includes data reduction, thematic categorization, interpretive comparison, and conceptual synthesis (Rachmad, 2025). The conclusion is considered valid when it is supported by consistent evidence across multiple data sources and when it adequately explains the relationship between the main research problem, the identified gap, and the observed communicative practices (Khamis, 2024). In this way, the findings are expected to provide a credible and contextually grounded explanation of how cultural identity is continuously constructed and negotiated in online spaces.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that cultural identity in virtual communities is not preserved in a static or purely inherited form, but is continuously negotiated through communication, symbolic representation, and collective participation in digital environments. Based on online participant observation, in-depth interviews, and content analysis of selected Instagram- and Facebook-based communities, the research reveals that tradition and modernity are not positioned as absolute opposites by community members. Instead, they are treated as interdependent cultural resources that must be balanced in order to maintain relevance, legitimacy, and continuity in online spaces. Participants consistently described digital platforms as sites where cultural values could be defended, displayed, adapted, and contested at the same time. This finding directly addresses the main research problem, namely how cultural identity is negotiated when inherited traditions encounter the fluid and highly visible communicative conditions of virtual communities. The evidence suggests that identity negotiation occurs through three principal patterns: the selective preservation of tradition, the strategic

adaptation of cultural expression to digital norms, and the collective regulation of authenticity within the community.

The first major finding concerns the selective preservation of tradition. Members of the observed virtual communities did not simply reproduce cultural practices exactly as they were understood offline. Rather, they chose particular symbols, narratives, rituals, linguistic expressions, and visual codes that could be translated effectively into digital form. Traditional dress, greetings, oral expressions, ceremonial images, and local moral values were repeatedly recontextualized through captions, hashtags, short videos, visual storytelling, and community campaigns. Participants explained that not all cultural elements could be easily communicated online, and therefore a process of selection inevitably took place. This finding is strongly aligned with Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, which views identity not as a fixed essence but as a process of becoming, positioning, and representation (Milan, 2023). The communities did not preserve culture by freezing it; they preserved it by narrating it, curating it, and making it visible in forms that digital audiences could understand. In implementation terms, this means that virtual communities function as interpretive spaces where cultural memory is reformulated through mediated representation (Londoño-Proañó, 2025). This also responds to the identified research gap, because previous studies often treated online identity as mere display rather than as a process of cultural reconstruction shaped by selective representation (Nwagbara, 2025).

The second important finding reveals that adaptation to modern digital culture is not generally perceived by participants as betrayal of tradition, but as a necessary communicative strategy. Many participants noted that younger members especially felt a responsibility to keep cultural traditions "alive" by presenting them through contemporary formats such as reels, memes, digital posters, live discussions, and short-form educational content. They argued that unless culture is translated into the communicative grammar of digital media, it risks becoming invisible to younger audiences (Sajarwa et al., 2023). At the same time, adaptation created tension. Some members welcomed creative reinterpretation, while others feared simplification, commercialization, and loss of sacred meaning. This dynamic can be explained through Hall's emphasis on representation and transformation, but it is also illuminated by danah boyd's theory of networked publics (Susilo et al., 2024). The platform affordances of persistence, scalability, searchability, and replicability enabled cultural content to circulate widely, but also exposed it to reinterpretation by unintended audiences (Nser et al., 2024). In practical implementation, this means that digital visibility expands cultural reach while simultaneously reducing community control over meaning (Koad & Dejpawuttikul, 2025). The findings therefore show that modernity is not external to tradition; it enters tradition through the infrastructures of networked communication (A. Bhatia, 2023).

A third major finding concerns the construction and regulation of authenticity in virtual communities. Members did not simply share cultural content freely; they also debated what counted as "real," "respectful," "appropriate," or "too modern." Moderators and senior community participants often played important roles in shaping acceptable forms of expression, correcting misinterpretations, and setting symbolic boundaries between legitimate cultural adaptation and excessive distortion. For example, several participants indicated that posting traditional clothing with modern styling might be accepted if accompanied by educational explanation, but criticized if used only for aesthetic branding without cultural context. These patterns are closely connected to Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory, especially the role of categorization, group identification, and social comparison in producing collective norms (Uyuni et al., 2025). The communities formed symbolic in-group boundaries around acceptable cultural expression and used these boundaries to regulate belonging. What emerged was not merely individual identity performance, but collective identity management. This finding is particularly significant because it explains how cultural identity online is shaped not only by representation and platform structure, but also by group-based judgments about authenticity and legitimacy (Benu et al., 2025). In relation to implementation, the result suggests that online cultural communities require norms, moderation, and interpretive guidance if they are to balance inclusiveness with cultural responsibility (X. Zhang & Wang, 2025).

The findings can be summarized in the following analytical table based on the qualitative themes generated through thematic analysis.

Main Finding	Empirical Indication from the Data	Related Theory	Interpretive Meaning	Practical Implementation
Selective preservation of tradition	Members curate specific symbols, rituals, language, and heritage narratives for online presentation	Stuart Hall (1990)	Cultural identity is represented and reconstructed, not simply inherited	Digital cultural campaigns should preserve context, meaning, and narrative depth
Strategic adaptation to digital modernity	Communities use reels, memes, short captions, and visual content to make tradition relevant to younger audiences	Stuart Hall; danah boyd	Identity is mediated through representation and shaped by networked platform affordances	Cultural institutions need platform-sensitive communication strategies
Collective regulation of authenticity	Moderators and members debate legitimacy, appropriateness, and symbolic limits of adaptation	Henri Tajfel	Group identity shapes symbolic boundaries and standards of belonging	Community governance should include value-based moderation and contextual explanation
Expanded visibility but reduced control	Cultural expressions circulate beyond intended audiences and are reinterpreted widely	danah boyd	Networked publics amplify communication while destabilizing authorial control	Digital literacy is needed to manage visibility, remix, and audience collapse
Hybrid identity formation	Members combine traditional values with modern self-expression and global digital aesthetics	Hall; Tajfel; boyd	Cultural identity becomes hybrid, negotiated, relational, and technologically mediated	Programs on cultural heritage should integrate creativity with ethical cultural interpretation

Another important finding is that hybrid identity formation became the dominant mode of cultural participation in the observed virtual communities. Rather than choosing between pure tradition and complete modernity, many participants consciously combined both. They might use modern editing techniques to present ancestral customs, employ contemporary design language to promote local philosophy, or discuss cultural obligations using the vocabulary of youth activism, digital citizenship, or lifestyle branding. This hybridization was not experienced as confusion but as a pragmatic response to contemporary communication realities. However, hybrid identity was not free from conflict. Participants from older or more conservative segments sometimes interpreted hybrid forms as signs of cultural dilution, while younger members saw them as indicators of cultural resilience. Here the three theories become mutually reinforcing. Hall helps explain the fluid and constructed nature of cultural identity; Tajfel explains why groups defend specific versions of authenticity; and boyd clarifies how digital architectures intensify visibility, circulation, and contestation (Bhatti & Pardaev, 2025). In terms of the main research problem, the findings confirm that the negotiation between tradition and modernity is not peripheral but central to how cultural identity is experienced online.

These findings also provide a direct response to the research gap identified earlier. The gap lay in the limited attention given by prior research to cultural identity as a communicative, negotiated, and platform-mediated process (Simoës, 2023). The present findings show that virtual communities are not passive spaces where pre-existing identities are displayed. They are active arenas where identity is constructed, corrected, debated, and transformed (Castells, 2025). This contribution is important because earlier studies often focused either on self-presentation or on the broader effects of digital

globalization without fully examining the internal communicative labor through which communities maintain symbolic continuity (Lu, 2024). By showing how members select, adapt, justify, and regulate cultural expression, this research offers a more precise explanation of identity work in online spaces. The novelty of the findings lies in demonstrating that the negotiation of tradition and modernity is sustained by a triangular relationship among representation, group boundary-making, and platform affordances (Phan et al., 2025). This triangulated explanation extends beyond the assumptions of many previous studies and provides a stronger conceptual link between culture, communication, and digital infrastructure (Song et al., 2024).

In relation to the research questions, the findings indicate that cultural identity in virtual communities is constructed through communicative performances that are both personal and collective. Members interpret tradition not as an unchangeable set of rules, but as a shared symbolic resource that must be continually made meaningful in relation to present realities. The relationship between traditional values and modern digital practices is therefore not inherently antagonistic. Instead, conflict arises when adaptation appears to erase context, sacredness, or collective recognition. The communicative tensions that emerge center on authenticity, generational authority, visibility, commercialization, and symbolic legitimacy (Grigore & Cobzeanu, 2025). Platform dynamics also play a decisive role (Mattes et al., 2025). Because social media rewards speed, brevity, emotional engagement, and visual attractiveness, members often simplify or stylize cultural expression to gain audience attention (Kianpour et al., 2024). Yet that very process can invite criticism from other members who fear that simplification weakens cultural integrity. This answers the research formulation by showing that negotiation happens through discourse, visuality, interaction norms, and platform logic simultaneously (Stepanova et al., 2024).

The findings also fulfill the research objectives of the study. The first objective was to analyze how cultural identity is negotiated in virtual communities. This objective is met through evidence that identity is continuously formed through selective preservation, adaptation, and regulation. The second objective was to explain how tradition is maintained, reinterpreted, or contested in online spaces. This is demonstrated in the data showing that members preserve certain cultural forms, reinterpret others for digital visibility, and debate the limits of acceptable change. The third objective was to understand how tensions between continuity and change are managed by community members. The findings show that such tensions are managed through moderation practices, educational framing, symbolic explanation, and peer correction. The final objective was to strengthen conceptual understanding of the relationship between virtual communication and identity formation. By linking empirical findings to Hall, Tajfel, and boyd, the study achieves this objective and offers an integrated explanation of digital cultural negotiation (Bailey, 2023).

The theoretical benefit of the findings is substantial. The study supports Hall's proposition that identity is not fixed but constantly produced through representation and historical positioning (Teusner, 2024). It also expands Hall's framework by showing how digital representation compresses cultural history into rapid, repeatable, and highly visible symbolic formats (Krantz, 2023). Likewise, the findings confirm Tajfel's argument that group membership matters deeply in shaping norms and evaluations (Kahfi et al., 2025). In online cultural communities, the defense of authenticity is not merely personal preference but an expression of collective identity and symbolic boundary work (D. Chen, 2024). Finally, the findings reinforce boyd's view that networked publics restructure participation, visibility, and audience formation (Nath, 2024). The study shows that cultural identity online cannot be understood apart from the infrastructures that make messages persistent, searchable, and scalable (Duran, 2023). Academically, these contributions strengthen interdisciplinary dialogue among communication studies, cultural studies, and digital sociology (Rothe et al., 2024). Practically, they offer guidance for community managers, cultural institutions, educators, and digital activists who seek to communicate culture in ways that are both engaging and respectful (Lontoh & Wibowo, 2025). The implementation dimension is especially clear: institutions should not merely digitize cultural content, but design participatory, contextual, and ethically informed strategies that recognize group norms and platform dynamics (Yazan et al., 2023).

The discussion of these findings becomes even stronger when placed in relation to previous research (Crawley & Green, 2024). Earlier studies on online identity often emphasized self-expression, globalization, or digital hybridity, but many did not explore sufficiently how communities regulate meaning internally (Kustritz, 2023). The present findings resonate with previous scholarship showing that digital spaces enable cultural preservation among dispersed or younger populations, yet they go further by explaining the mechanisms through which preservation becomes possible (Munir et al., 2023). Similarly, prior studies on digital participation have shown that platforms accelerate cultural circulation, but this study adds that circulation always creates interpretive vulnerability (Wu et al., 2024). Previous work on identity performance has also shown that online users curate their personas, but the current research demonstrates that in virtual cultural communities, persona curation is inseparable from community judgment and symbolic accountability (Ningrum & Abdullah, 2025). Therefore, in relation to the main problem, the current findings do not reject previous studies; rather, they extend them by integrating representation, collective identity, and network structure into a single explanatory model (Gijssen et al., 2024).

From the perspective of the research gap, the findings make clear that the absence of integrated theoretical analysis in earlier studies has limited understanding of cultural identity in digital spaces (Rao, 2025). Research that emphasizes only Hall risks underestimating group regulation; research relying only on Tajfel may overlook mediation and platform architecture; and research focused only on networked publics may neglect cultural history and identity depth (Shmushko, 2023). The present study addresses that gap by combining the three theories and showing their empirical relevance in a coherent way. This integrative contribution constitutes the novelty of the research. It reveals that cultural identity in virtual communities is negotiated through a layered process in which meaning is represented, belonging is policed, and communication is technologically structured (H. I. Chen & Sevilla-Pavón, 2023). That layered understanding is particularly valuable for future studies of digital heritage, online communities, and mediated identity (Zhong & Wu, 2025).

In practical and academic terms, the findings show that virtual communities can serve as spaces of cultural resilience if supported by contextual communication, inclusive moderation, and critical digital literacy (Herath et al., 2024). Theoretically, the study advances understanding of identity as mediated negotiation (Pham, 2023). Academically, it opens pathways for comparative and longitudinal research into how different cultural communities navigate online change (Andersen, 2023). Practically, it suggests that policy actors, educational institutions, and cultural organizations should support community-led digital heritage efforts while also addressing risks of decontextualization and symbolic conflict (Sun & Chen, 2025). In conclusion, the findings confirm that virtual communities are not simply places where culture is shown; they are spaces where culture is argued over, remade, and legitimized. Through the lenses of Stuart Hall, Henri Tajfel, and danah boyd, the study demonstrates that the negotiation of tradition and modernity is the central mechanism through which cultural identity survives and evolves in online spaces (Hoover & Echchaibi, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that cultural identity in virtual communities is not a fixed inheritance that is simply transferred from one generation to another, but a dynamic and communicative process that is continuously negotiated in online spaces. Based on the findings and discussion, the research shows that virtual communities function as important social arenas in which individuals and groups reinterpret, preserve, contest, and modernize cultural meanings. In the context of the study title, *Cultural Identity in Virtual Communities: Negotiating Tradition and Modernity in Online Spaces*, the central conclusion is that tradition and modernity do not operate as rigid opposites in digital interaction. Instead, they are brought into continuous dialogue through mediated practices such as posting, commenting, visual curation, symbolic narration, and community moderation. Through these practices, culture is not merely displayed; it is actively reconstructed and socially validated.

The findings demonstrate that members of virtual communities selectively preserve cultural elements that can be meaningfully translated into digital communication. Traditional symbols, language expressions, values, and rituals are not reproduced in identical form, but are curated in ways that make them intelligible and attractive within contemporary online environments. This confirms that cultural

continuity in digital spaces is not based on repetition alone, but on reinterpretation. In this sense, the study concludes that the survival of culture in online communities depends on its communicative adaptability. Cultural identity remains relevant not because it is protected from change, but because it is negotiated carefully within changing media environments. The research therefore reinforces the view that digital space is not necessarily a threat to tradition, but a field in which tradition can be reformulated and reintroduced to broader and younger audiences.

At the same time, the study also concludes that adaptation to modern digital forms generates significant tension. The results and discussion show that the use of contemporary formats such as short videos, visual branding, memes, and digital storytelling may increase cultural visibility, but may also create concerns regarding simplification, commodification, and the weakening of cultural depth. This means that the negotiation of cultural identity in virtual communities is always accompanied by struggles over meaning, legitimacy, and symbolic authority. Online participation expands opportunities for representation, yet it also makes culture more vulnerable to reinterpretation by unintended audiences. Therefore, the conclusion drawn from the findings is that digital modernity does not erase tradition automatically, but it does transform the conditions under which tradition is understood, circulated, and judged.

Another major conclusion is that virtual communities play a decisive role in regulating cultural authenticity. The findings indicate that community members do not act only as content producers, but also as interpreters, gatekeepers, and evaluators of legitimate cultural expression. Through comments, moderation practices, peer correction, and collective discussion, members create symbolic boundaries regarding what is considered respectful, authentic, or excessively modern. This demonstrates that cultural identity online is shaped not only by individual self-expression but also by collective norms and shared standards. Thus, the study concludes that online cultural identity is simultaneously personal and communal. It is produced through interaction between self-representation, group belonging, and platform visibility. This conclusion is particularly important because it shows that virtual communities are not passive digital gatherings, but active social formations that influence how culture is maintained and transformed.

Drawing from the discussion, the study further concludes that hybrid identity has become the dominant pattern in virtual cultural interaction. Most participants do not choose between preserving tradition completely or embracing modernity without limits. Instead, they combine elements of both in order to sustain cultural relevance in rapidly changing digital contexts. Such hybridity reflects an adaptive strategy rather than a cultural failure. It allows members to remain connected to inherited values while engaging with contemporary communicative norms. However, this hybridity also requires negotiation, because not all members agree on the acceptable limits of innovation. For this reason, the study concludes that the negotiation of tradition and modernity is the core mechanism through which cultural identity evolves in online spaces.

Overall, the conclusion of this research, as derived from the results and discussion, is that virtual communities are central sites of cultural continuity and cultural change. They enable the preservation of heritage, but they also encourage reinterpretation, negotiation, and symbolic contestation. Cultural identity in online spaces is therefore best understood as a mediated, relational, and evolving process. The findings confirm that the interaction between tradition and modernity is not a peripheral issue, but the main condition shaping how identity is expressed and recognized in virtual communities. In conclusion, this study affirms that digital spaces do not simply host culture; they actively participate in reshaping it. Through continuous negotiation, virtual communities become places where cultural identity is not only remembered, but also redefined for the present and future.

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