

Exploration of Malay Cultural Hybridity on TikTok Through Semantic Network Analysis

Penerokaan Hibriditi Budaya Melayu di TikTok Melalui Analisis Rangkaian Semantik

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ABSTRACT

The digital space serves as a melting pot where various elements of cultures and discourses intersect, as also seen in contemporary Malay society. This study explores how traditional values and global influences shape Malay identity by analyzing 34,810 TikTok comments from 126 videos related to the keyword "Melayu." The data were analyzed using semantic network analysis (SNA) and the 3P framework: cultural products, perspectives, and practices. Data pre-processing was performed using Python on Google Colab. Term frequency was used to generate a co-occurrence matrix to examine semantic relationships with degree centrality and modularity analysis conducted via Gephi to identify themes manually. Results were analyzed and grouped using three frameworks: cultural products, cultural perspectives, and cultural practices. Findings define tangible and narrative hybridization of Malay identity in TikTok, as well as strengthening concepts of glocalization, memory ecologies, and third space by offering the concept of the transformation of cultural identity. This research demonstrates the usefulness of Semantic Network Analysis (SNA) in large-scale and unstructured social media datasets. Due to limitations of this research that focus solely on symbolic/narrative representations in social media, we suggest that future research conduct focus group discussions (FGDs) to understand the perceptions and challenges faced by Malays in shaping their identities in everyday lives.

Keywords: Semantic Network Analysis; TikTok; Social Media; Malay; Cultural Hybridity

ABSTRAK

Ruang digital berfungsi sebagai tempat pertemuan pelbagai elemen budaya dan wacana, seperti yang juga dilihat dalam masyarakat Melayu kontemporari. Kajian ini meneroka bagaimana nilai-nilai tradisional dan pengaruh global membentuk identiti Melayu melalui analisis 34,810 komen daripada 126 video yang berkaitan dengan kata kunci "Melayu." Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis rangkaian semantik (SNA) dan kerangka kerja 3P: produk budaya, perspektif dan amalan. Pra-pemprosesan data dilakukan menggunakan Python di Google Colab. Term frequency digunakan untuk menghasilkan matriks co-occurrence bagi mengkaji hubungan semantik dengan analisis degree centrality dan analisis modularity dijalankan melalui Gephi untuk mengenal pasti tema secara manual. Keputusan dianalisis dan dikumpulkan menggunakan tiga kerangka kerja: produk budaya, perspektif budaya dan amalan budaya. Penemuan mentakrifkan hibridisasi ketara dan naratif identiti Melayu dalam TikTok, serta mengukuhkan konsep glokalisasi, ekologi memori dan ruang ketiga dengan menawarkan konsep transformasi identiti budaya. Kajian ini menunjukkan kegunaan Analisis Rangkaian Semantik (SNA) dalam set data media sosial berskala besar dan tidak berstruktur. Disebabkan oleh batasan kajian ini yang hanya tertumpu pada perwakilan simbolik/naratif dalam media sosial, kami mencadangkan agar kajian masa hadapan menjalankan perbincangan kumpulan fokus (FGD) untuk memahami persepsi dan cabaran yang dihadapi oleh orang Melayu dalam membentuk identiti mereka dalam kehidupan seharian.

Kata kunci: Analisis Rangkaian Semantik; TikTok; Media Sosial; Melayu; Hibriditi Budaya

INTRODUCTION

The shifting of digitalization in communication has transformed how society communicates, consumes and shares perspectives, in terms of its ways, forms, and tools (AL-Zoubi, 2024). People nowadays are more interactive in creating new ideas and discourses in real-time (Moreno & D'Angelo, 2020), compared to previous generations who were limited by analog transmission and one-way media of communication. Among various digital platforms, social media is the most frequently observed by researchers in this phenomenon.

According to We are social (2023) statistics, today's social media users account for 59.9% of the world's populations, and 62.1% of those come from Southeast Asia. Although Facebook still ranks at the top among social media platforms internationally (Smith & Anderson, 2018). TikTok has overtaken others as the most downloaded social media app in the worldwide since August 2023 (CNN Indonesia, 2023). As social media becomes more personal and interactive, it allows users to show and associate the content with their own identities and to interact both locally and globally. Due to the social media characteristic tend to be more personal, each user has their own authority to define what they want to create and consume (Mohamed, 2020).

TikTok's characteristic as a short video content-sharing platform (Kaye et al., 2022) with its brief and ease of content creation and sharing, makes TikTok highly accessible. Furthermore, TikTok offers a unique feature called 'For You Page' (FYP), which allows users to reach audiences more easily which may be different from how other social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter work (Vera & Ghosh, 2025). It also delivers a fun and immersive user experience, builds strong network effects by supporting creators, leverages human psychology through AI-driven algorithms, and facilitates viral content dissemination through broad social interactions. Continuous innovations, including integrated shopping and educational features, further strengthen its position as a leading digital platform (Hou et al., 2025).

In the context of Malay society, TikTok has become the most popular digital platform, not only does TikTok serve as a platform for entertainment, but more importantly it facilitates identity production, shapes cultural expressions, negotiates traditional values in more contemporary and relevant way. Blending the local cultural elements in social media content, such as identity expressions, historical narratives, language and ethnic symbol, with popular aesthetics that are adaptable to global tastes has created a new vibrant form of expression that is increasingly embraced in today's postmodern era, where modernity is no longer seen as the only ideal, as stated by Lyotard (1979) who defined postmodernism as '*incredulity toward metanarratives*'.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATION OF MALAY IDENTITY

The redefinition of Malay identity can be traced back to the period prior to British colonial rule (Alatas & Alatas, 2013). Orientalist discourse frequently depicted Malays as lazy, unskilled, naive, and even as superstitious Muslims (Swettenham, 2005). In contrast, from the Malay perspective, the long history of cultural dynamism demonstrates the existence of an authentic identity grounded in three essential elements: customs (*adat istiadat*), the Malay language, and Islam (Ahmad, 2009). Accordingly, being Malay is not defined solely by ethnicity, but by the practice of Malay customs, the use of the Malay language, and adherence to Islam (Abd Aziz, 2012).

Customs (*adat istiadat*) serves as the fundamental basis regulating nearly all aspects of Malay society (Milner, 2011). Effendy (2004) categorizes custom into four domains: Islamic-based custom; social custom grounded in deliberation and consensus; traditional custom

derived from hereditary practices; and ceremonial adat that reflects the Malay worldview. The Malay language has long functioned as a regional lingua franca, from the era of Srivijaya to the Malacca Sultanate, serving not only as a medium of communication but also as a marker of social, ethnic, and national identity (Santoso, 2006).

Islam likewise constitutes a central pillar of Malay identity, shaped by multiple factors including Islamization, trade, intermarriage, politics, and the rational appeal of Islamic ideology (Ishak & Abdullah, 2012). In Malaysia, where Malays form the majority, legal provisions render Islam inseparable from Malay identity; one is not considered Malay without professing Islam (Putra, 2016; Shukri, 2023). Although this association has been subject to criticism from a human rights perspective, Malaysia continues to uphold it. Thus, adherence to Islam, the use of the Malay language, and the practice of *adat* remain the core elements that define what it means to be Malay (Nah, 2003).

However, the Malay identity, which is integrated into Islam, language, and customs, is not immune to challenges in the modern context. (Nah, 2003). Basri (2019) categorize these challenges into two forms: internal and external. Internal challenges include a weak sense of identity among the younger generation, who lack awareness of their history and culture, limited strategic and creative thinking, and the neglect of Islamic values as a marker of societal decline. External challenges arise from globalization in the fields of politics, economics, and technology, as well as the influence of Western ideologies such as liberalism and hedonism.

In Malaysia, the Malay community also exists in diversity with the Indian and Chinese populations, each maintaining distinct beliefs, customs, and lifestyles (Abdullah et al., 2021). Cultural mixing has long been evident through intermarriage, architecture, cuisine, and other cultural forms. Therefore, innovative and inclusive approaches are needed to ensure that the younger generation continues to uphold Malay values in the midst of globalization, while maintaining cultural norms and philosophies that are integrated with Islam. Thus, what is happening in Malaysia illustrates how cultural hybridization is becoming an inevitable process that challenges and reshapes the meaning of Malay identity in contemporary society.

CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION

Culture is a concept that has been defined by many scholars, one of the earliest scholars was the British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor “Culture is that whole complex which comprises the knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs, and any other abilities and habits acquired by the individuals of a society” (Tylor, 1889). Although there is no single definition of culture, the definitions of subsequent scholars generally are quite similar.

The concept of culture in language education is often framed using the 3P model (Products, Practices, Perspectives), originally developed in the U.S. foreign language education standards (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1999), and applied by scholars such as Chen (2017), namely Perspective, Product and Practice. Perspective refers to the collection of attitudes, values, beliefs, assumptions and tendencies (Duranti, 1997; Kramsch, 2014). Practice is patterns, norms and social interactions. Meanwhile product includes both tangible and intangible creations such as books, equipment, food, laws and artistic expression such as music and visual art (Chen, 2017).

The cultural interaction enables changes in perspectives, practices and products. According to Gilroy (1995), those interactions allow them to modify, explore, and develop themselves which lead them to adopt diverse cultural elements. Bhabha (1994) defines it as ‘interstitial space’. This interaction gives rise to cultural hybridity as a new creation formed from the combination of different cultural elements across traditional boundaries that have been created.

CULTURAL ACTIVITY IN DIGITAL SPACE

In the contemporary context, social media acts as a ‘third space’ (Bhabha, 1994) where users from diverse cultural backgrounds interact, adapt and create new collective identities capable of bringing about real change (Abou-Agag, 2021). This ‘third space’ is counter-hegemonic and serves as dynamic site for cultural negotiation (Edirisinghe et al., 2011).

For instance, the phenomena of travel and food vloggers act as intercultural communication tools (Khatser, 2019). In other perspective, the factor of Cultural Proximity accelerates the introduction of Korean culture across Asia such as Indonesia, Malaysia, China and Japan (Ariffin et al., 2018; Ganghariya & Kanozia, 2020; Lee, 2018; Sintowoko, 2021). Online gaming activities increase intercultural awareness and literacy despite containing stereotypes of Eurocentrism (Greenfield, 2004; Shliakhovchuk & García, 2020). Viral trends such as memes also serve as mediums for cultural criticism and expression (Chatterjee, 2019; Lewis, 2016), while social media has popularized cultural celebrations such as Halloween outside the West (Asia Media Center, 2020). In the study of cultural hybridity on TikTok, cultural content is very widespread with algorithms that facilitate interaction without the need to follow directly and encourage viral trends through the FYP and blue comment features, which promote dialogue and user collaboration more dynamically (Taborosi & Maljugić, 2022). The competitiveness of virality, hashtag trends, and collaborative content makes TikTok a platform that facilitates community engagement and potential intercultural interaction in digital spaces.

Recent studies have increasingly highlighted how digital platforms create new spaces for large-scale identity negotiation. However, existing studies on cultural hybridity are largely based on postcolonial theory, particularly the concept of the "third space," which remains conceptually limited in its attempts to capture how hybridity is empirically manifested in the unstructured, large-scale social media environment. Furthermore, previous research has not systematically examined how cultural meanings are constructed and circulated relationally through digital interactions, particularly on platforms like TikTok.

To address this gap, this study integrates the 3Ps of culture framework with semantic network analysis (SNA) to provide an empirical mapping of how Malay cultural identity is actively constructed, negotiated, and connected in the digital space. Thus, this study bridges classical theoretical perspectives on hybridity with contemporary digital analytics, offering a more structural understanding of how cultural representations emerge as coherent forms, hybrid configurations, or fragmented expressions.

Therefore, this study aims to examine how Malay cultural products, perspectives, and practices are negotiated within TikTok's semantic network, and how these digital interactions facilitate cultural hybridity and reconfigure contemporary Malay identities.

METHODOLOGY

DATA COLLECTION

DATA SELECTION STRATEGY

The data used in this study was selected based on the keyword ‘Malay’ to gather relevant video content through the TikTok search box. According to several previous studies, the scraping process on social media is more efficiently conducted through the web version. In this case, we access tiktok.com using a desktop browser without linking or logging into any account to avoid potential bias caused by algorithm preferences or the popularity of certain accounts (Fadel, 2024; Marynak et al., 2022).

During the searching process, we noted a total of 131 video contents. In addition, to address time constraints, technical limitations, and to minimize potential bias during the comment retrieval process, we applied several exclusion criteria as follows:

- Expired video link during the data collection process
- Videos containing more than 5K comments. (Due to limitations in researcher capacity, time, and computational resources, as well as to avoid the dominance of a single topic or trend in the dataset)
- Videos unrelated to Malay culture
- Videos without any comments

Limitations in data selection and collection is part of research reality. As argued by Boyd & Crawford (2012), big data are shaped by uneven access, increasing data monetization, and institutional constraints, including national, community, and university contexts. These factors contribute to partial, non-representative, and non-holistic datasets. However, such limitations do not render big data research irrelevant. Instead, they required greater methodological transparency and critical awareness. Clearly articulated data selection strategies, including inclusion and exclusion criteria, allow researchers to produce meaningful insights while acknowledging that findings are based on constructed and bounded datasets rather than complete representations of reality.

A total of 25 video contents were excluded, resulting in a final 126 contents. Due to API limitations and TikTok developer terms and conditions that only provide and help researchers from a particular region from selected academic institution or not-for-profit and/or independent researchers from the US, UK, EEA, EU, Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein (TikTok for Developers, 2023), we were compelled to run the scraping process manually by opening each video link from the 126 links, retrieving and expanding all the comments and replies in each link until the scrolling process stopped, and organizing all the comments in an excel sheet. We managed to collect a total of 34,810 comments. This is our main data for the next data preprocessing.

PREPROCESSING DATA

DATA CLEANSING STRATEGY

A total of 34,810 comments were cleaned using Google Colab, a cloud-based platform that enables interactive Python coding through a notebook interface without requiring local installation. It supports large-scale data processing with libraries such as Pandas, NumPy, and the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK).

In this study, the data preprocessing stages include:

- Lowercase: Converts all text to lowercase to avoid duplicates of the same word with different capitalizations.
- Normalization: Removes punctuation, numbers, and special characters that are irrelevant to the analysis.
- Stemming: Reduces words to their root forms to group different variations of the same word.
- Tokenization: Splits sentences or text into individual word units (tokens) to facilitate subsequent analysis.

DATA PROCESSING

TERM FREQUENCY

The next step is to process the cleaned data to determine the frequency of occurrence (Term Frequency) of words in each unit. This is called a Document Terms Matrix (DTM). A DTM is a matrix containing words listed in columns and documents listed in rows, showing the frequency of occurrence of each word in the document. This step helps construct a Co-Occurrence Matrix.

CO-OCCURRENCE MATRIX

A Co-Occurrence Matrix is the result of multiplying a Document Terms Matrix (DTM) by a Document Terms Matrix transpose (DTM^t). A Co-Occurrence Matrix, also known as a Co-Word Matrix, quantifies how often pairs of words appear together in the same context, such as a document or sentence. This is symmetric matrices category (Leydesdorff & Vaughan, 2006). Although a document may contain many words, this matrix focuses on dyadic relationships, that is, the connections between two words at a time, because this pairwise representation is the fundamental unit in semantic network analysis, nodes represent words and edges represent their co-occurrence frequency, or relationship (Segev, 2022). Thus, the Co-occurrence Matrix essentially operationalizes pairwise word relationships, which serve as the foundation for semantic network analysis.

SEMANTIC NETWORK ANALYSIS

Semantic Network Analysis (SNA) contrasts with traditional content analysis, which typically relies on a supervised approach where researchers categorize data based on predefined classifications. In contrast, SNA adopts an unsupervised methodology, analyzing texts without predetermined categories. It groups words based on their co-occurrence within the text, producing a network that reveals the semantic relationships among concepts (Segev, 2022). Nonetheless, to extract specific themes and topics and to fully grasp the underlying social and cultural contexts, the output of SNA requires further qualitative interpretation. Therefore, SNA functions as an exploratory tool that maps the structural patterns of discourse, which are subsequently deepened through qualitative analysis.

DEGREE CENTRALITY

The Document-Term Matrix (DTM) was further processed and transformed into a degree centrality table, which is required for inputting node data into the visualization tool Gephi. Gephi is a widely used software for network analysis. Additionally, the previously constructed co-occurrence matrix was converted into an edge list formatted as a CSV file with three columns: source, target, and weight. These two files, the node list and the edge list are essential inputs for running analyses in Gephi.

GROUPING USING MODULARITY CLASS

The final process for finding partitions and related topics is to run the modularity statistics function in the Gephi tool. Basically, modularity is about how to group a network effectively, where most of the connections stay within the modules (same group), and only a few connections link between different groups (Gautam & Gupta, 2023). We believe that this statistical test is currently the best strategy for detecting communities, as it helps identify themes or groups of closely related words.

MANUAL THEMATIC INTERPRETATION

Following the automatic grouping of modularity-based communities, a manual thematic analysis was conducted to interpret the meaning of each cluster and connect it to the broader research context. This interpretive stage was essential for uncovering underlying themes, cultural references, and semantic nuances that may not be fully captured by Gephi visualization.

INTERCODER AGREEMENT

This study employed an intercoder agreement test to ensure consistency in coding the cultural framework categories. A total of 25 units of analysis were selected from a total of 162 modularity-based communities representing approximately 15% of the total data. This selection refers to recommendations that suggest using a sample of 10% to 20% of the total data for reliability assessment (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), with this study adopting the midpoint of 15%.

Initial coding was conducted by the researcher, then validated by an expert in the related field. Comparison results showed that of the 25 units of analysis, 20 units were agreed upon and 5 units were disagreed upon, resulting in an agreement level of 80%. The discrepancies were further discussed to refine category definitions and improve coding consistency, without significantly altering the main thematic structure identified in this study.

RESULTS

This chapter presents the analysis and visualization of the data using the 3Ps of culture framework: product, perspective, and practice. Gephi's modularity statistics function was used as an initial step to automatically group related data. However, the automated results were not entirely sufficient for final categorization, so further manual steps were necessary. These steps involved the merger of modularity classes with similar or overlapping topics, the removal of irrelevant keywords, and adjusting of clusters to better reflect the key themes that emerged.

CULTURAL PRODUCT FRAMEWORK

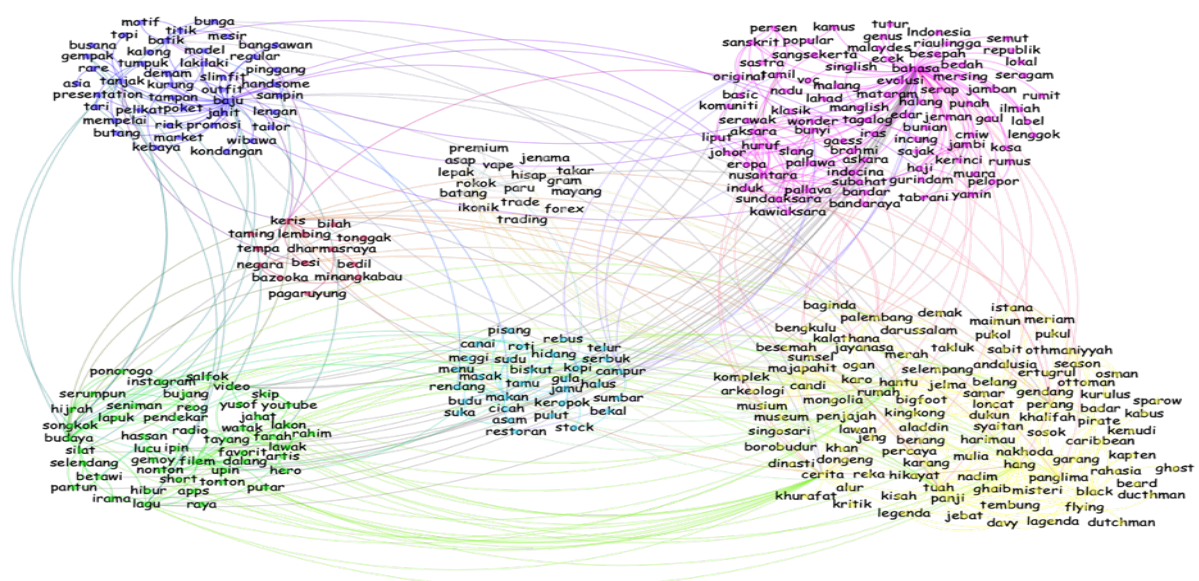


FIGURE 1. Thematic visualization of Malay cultural products on TikTok
Source: Researcher's own data using Gephi, 2025

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Clothes and Accessories</i> ● <i>Arts and Entertainment</i> ● <i>Folklores, Heroes, and Historical Narratives</i> ● <i>Malay Cuisine</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Weapons</i> ● <i>Languages and communications</i> ● <i>Lifestyle</i> |
|--|--|

1. ***Clothes and Accessories***
 - Traditional attire and social symbols in cultural ceremonies.
 - Negotiating cultural meanings between tradition and modernity, including processes of commodification and rebranding.
2. ***Arts and Entertainment***
 - A variety of platforms and formats used to present arts and entertainment.
 - The forms of local entertainment content and audience responses.
 - Traditional elements in performing arts.
 - Sharing arts and cultural products from Indonesia and Malaysia.
3. ***Folklores, Heroes, and Historical Narratives***
 - Malay Maritime myths and folklores that are often associated with the movie's narrative story from Pirates of the Caribbean.
 - Traditional artifacts and archaeological traces of Malay resistance.
 - The popularity of Turkish historical series among Malay society is due to the shared values and spirit of a Muslim identity.
 - Folklore, myths, and traditional beliefs.
4. ***Weapons***
 - Representation of traditional weapons throughout the history of Malay civilization.
5. ***Languages and Communications***
 - Historical knowledge of traditional Malay scripts and literature.
 - Language evolutions in modern contexts.
6. ***Lifestyle***
 - The lifestyle of contemporary Malay society.
 - Trends in digital economy and trade
 - Shifting in gold measurement in Malay society.
7. ***Malay Cuisine***
 - Popularity of modern and traditional Malay cuisine and culinary on social media.

Overall, the SNA analysis of these seven thematic categories of cultural products provides a strong empirical basis for the hybridization of Malay identity on TikTok. The dominance of historical narratives and linguistic identity is evident in the very high *Weighted Degree* (WD) values of the nodes '*bahasa*' (WD: 1285) and '*hang*' (WD: 629). The strength of the relationships within the Folklores and Heroes cluster is evidenced by the *Edge Weight* (W) of the pillar between '*hang-tuah*' (W: 360), the strongest connection in the network, and its association with global popular elements such as the Hollywood movie '*caribbean-pirate*' (W: 16), which depicts the imagination of maritime life and sailors in the past. The material dimension of Malay identity is emphasized through the categories of traditional clothing and weapons, as demonstrated by the connections '*baju-kurung*' (W: 78) and '*besi-keris*' (W: 20), while negotiations of modern aesthetics emerge through '*baju*', '*handsome*', '*slimfit*'. The evolution of communication is reflected in discussions of the historical roots of language through '*bahasa-sanskrit*' (W: 80), '*pallava-aksara*' (W:18), '*bahasa-klasik*' (W:72), and linguistic hybridity in '*bahasa-campur*' (W: 66) such as '*manglish*' and '*singlish*'. Typical foods such as '*budu-makan*' (W: 26) are frequently discussed on social media. Furthermore, modern

digital economic discourses such as 'forex' and 'trading' are also incorporated into cultural conversations.

These statistics cumulatively demonstrate that Malay identity on TikTok is no longer statically inherited but rather reconstructed through digital interactions that connect classical heritage with contemporary realities.

CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE FRAMEWORK

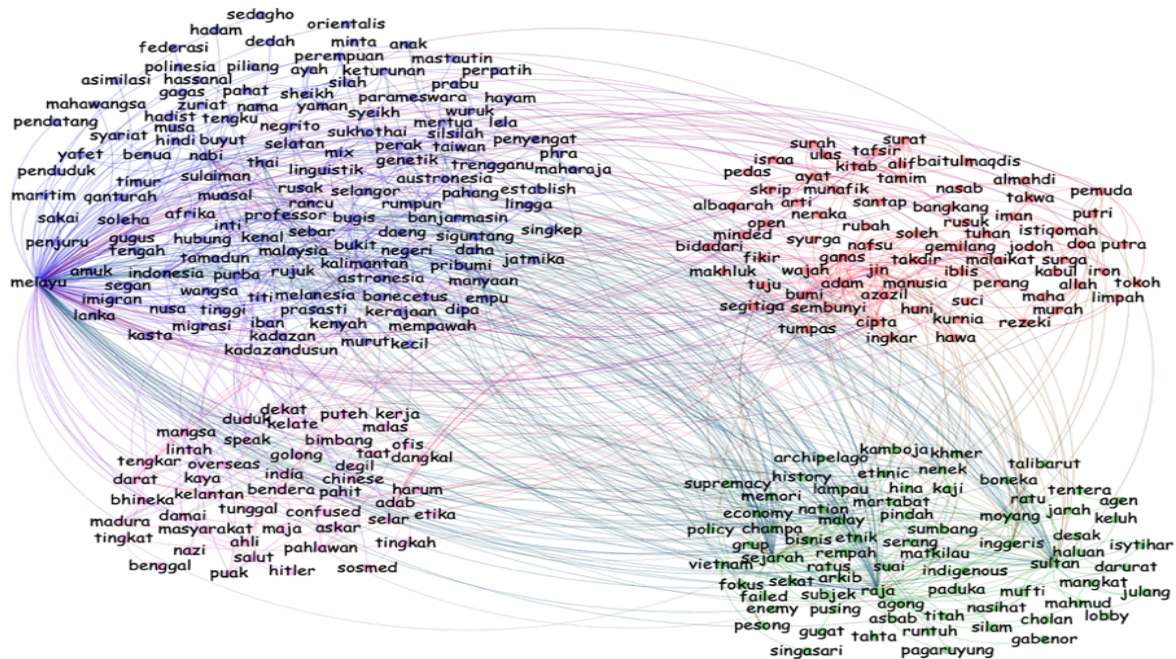


FIGURE 2. Thematic visualization of Malay cultural perspectives on TikTok
 Source: Researcher's own data using Gephi, 2025

- **Genealogy**
- **Theological Thought**
- **Multiculturalism Issues**
- **Historical Reflections**

1. Genealogy

- Aspects of genealogy are a prominent topic of discussion in the Malay digital community, with diverse interpretations of origins.
- The heritage of cultural values is reflected in traditions, norms, and evolving social systems.

2. Multiculturalism Issues

- Xenophobia and stereotypes issues.
- Nationalism and identity dilemmas.

3. Theological Thought

- Philosophical reflections on human beings in Islamic cosmology discourse
- Emphasizing belief in tauhid and God's Will
- Eschatological issues are a concern in Islamic thought

4. Historical Reflections

- Struggle, betrayal, and colonialism as a part of the Malay collective memory
- Distortions of post-colonial history affect the nation's understanding and dignity

Findings from a cultural perspective framework indicate that Malay digital discourse is strongly oriented toward collective memory and historical legitimacy. This is statistically demonstrated by the '*melayu*' node, which has the highest Weighted Degree (WD: 2936), which is most strongly connected to the historical perspective '*melayu-sejarah*' (W: 498) and traditional institutions through the relationship of '*melayu-raja*' (W: 424) as well as '*melayu-sultan*' (281).

The theological dimension also emerges as a significant pillar of identity, not only through the '*nabi*' node (WD: 180), but also through involvement in the broader Islamic cosmological narrative through the '*jin*' (WD: 156) and '*adam*' (WD: 148) nodes. The strength of genealogical connections is evident in cross-ethnic and regional interactions, such as '*bugis-melayu*' (W: 386) and '*kalimantan-melayu*' (W: 240), as well as the strengthening of ancestral memory through the '*moyang-nenek*' (W: 222) relationship.

These statistics show that TikTok users' perspectives on Malay identity are inclusive, crossing the geographical boundaries of modern nations such as '*malaysia-melayu*' (W: 220) and '*indonesia-melayu*' (W: 149), and acknowledging the reality of contemporary hybridity through the '*mix*' node (WD: 104), which overall strengthens the narrative of the 'Malay Group' in the digital space.

CULTURAL PRACTICE FRAMEWORK

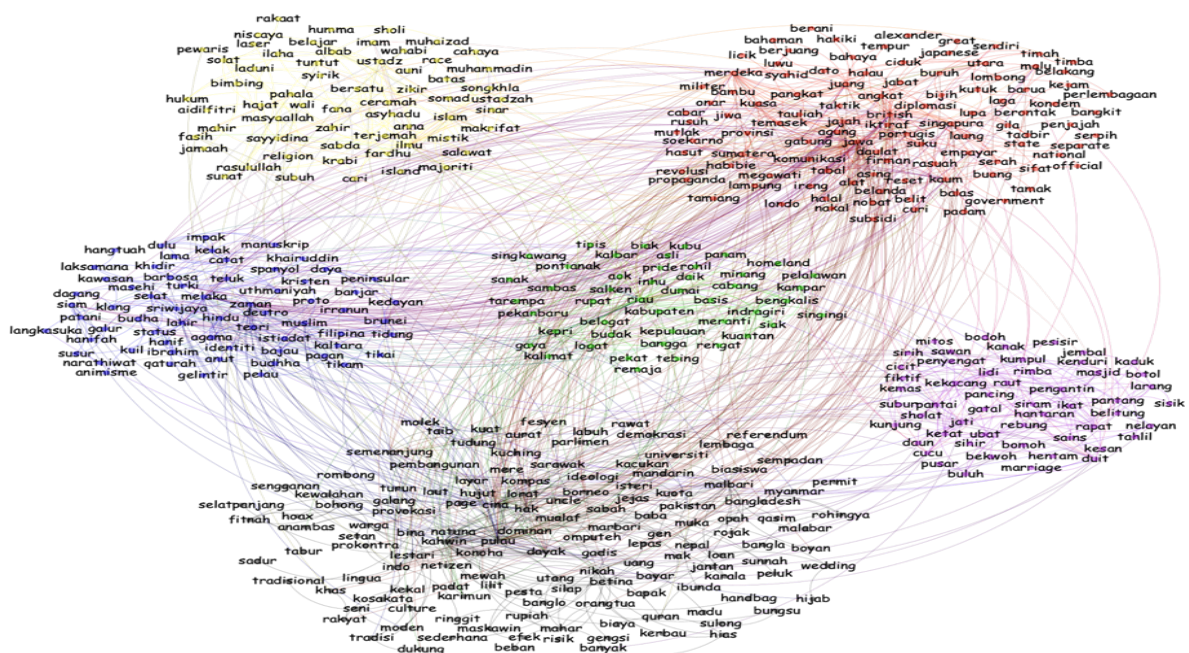


FIGURE 3. Thematic visualization of Malay cultural practices on TikTok
 Source: Researcher's own data using Gephi, 2025

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| ● Spiritual Practices | ● Culture of Struggle in Socio-Politics |
| ● Malay Chronicles | ● Cultural Affirmations |
| ● Malay Contemporary Issues | ● Local Wisdom |

1. Spiritual Practices

- Mysticism in Islam, which refers to Sufism.
- Ethno-Regional islamic identity exploration.
- Discursive elements in contemporary Islamic da'wah.
- Preserving of prayer and worship practices in Islam.

2. *Malay Chronicles*

- The ongoing chronicle of religion, history, and culture embodies cultural practices in the Malay world
- Preservation of Malay civilization through chronicles of religion, history, and identity.

3. *Malay Contemporary Issues*

- Issues of democracy, ideology, education and community rights.
- Economic and lifestyle dilemmas in modern marriages.
- The hybrid identities resulting from mixed marriages.
- Cultural transformations, such as the modernization of the tudung culture from an obligation to a trend, the modernization of architecture, and the adoption of language.
- Issues of migration and territorial disputes in Malay territories.
- Cultural disinformation phenomena in digital media.

4. *Culture of Struggle in Socio-politics*

- Continuities of leadership criticism and betrayal across Malay civilization.
- Reflections on resistance, struggle, and independence movements.
- Post-colonial national identity discourse.

5. *Cultural Affirmations*

- Expressions of affirmation and identity, as well as cultural pride.

6. *Local Wisdom*

- Cultural taboos and myths in Malay tradition.
- Communal values of gotong royong as a collective practice of unity and advice in Malay philosophy.
- The pros and cons of traditional mystical medication, therapy or treatment, particularly in relation to its cultural significance and scientific validity.
- Livelihood practices of coastal Malay communities.
- Traditional marriage practices.

An analysis of Malay cultural practices on TikTok provides empirical evidence of the interplay between historical memory, authenticity, and contemporary social dynamics. The dominance of narratives of struggle and colonialism is evident in the very high *Weighted Degree* (WD) values of the nodes '*british*' (WD: 890), '*jajah*' (WD: 727), and '*merdeka*' (WD: 574), with the strongest connections of '*british-jajah*' (W: 230) and '*british-merdeka*' (W: 132).

Spiritual practices on TikTok represent a hybridization of routine worship, mysticism (Sufism), and contemporary da'wah. Statistics confirm the centrality nodes of the '*muslim*' and '*masjid*' (WD: 124) as network pillars with functional ties to the '*masjid-sholat*' (W: 24) relationship. The esoteric dimension is detected through the dominance of the '*ilmu*' (WD: 178) connected to the terms '*makrifat*' and '*laduni*', while digital religious guidance is reflected in the '*auni-ustadz*' relationship (W: 10). The depth of inner practice that emerges in the discourse of '*fana-zikir*' (W: 4) confirms the shift of spiritual practice from the private sphere to collective negotiation in the digital public sphere.

In the contemporary issues category, statistics show the negotiation of identity and economic burdens through the nodes of '*kahwin*' (WD: 388) and '*duit*' (WD: 136), which are closely connected to the discourse of interethnic marriage through the '*cina-kahwin*' (W: 60) and the financial dilemma of '*kahwin-loan*' (W: 12).

The dimension of local wisdom and territorial conflict emerges significantly in the '*pulau-riau*' (W: 433), while the desire for tradition is evident in the practices of '*pantang*' (WD: 80) and '*larang*' (WD: 76) within the '*larang-pantang*' relationship (W: 30). Finally, the affirmation of cultural friendship is manifested through the '*daulat*' node (WD: 130) connected

to 'angkat' (WD: 70). These statistics collectively represent Malay cultural practices on social media as a space for negotiating past memories and the dilemmas of modern life.

DISCUSSION

TANGIBLE HYBRIDIZATION OF MALAY IDENTITY BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

The concluding remarks made by Professor Khoo Kay Kim in 2011, “The Malays today are confronted by a ponderous dilemma” (Kim, 2011), remain relevant today, as the Malays are still facing a big dilemma between maintaining tradition or adapting to the modern world. which is reflected in our research, shows that the identity of contemporary Malay society on social media remains a space for negotiation between traditional values (religious nuances) and the global influence of modernity (fashion icons). The commodification of cultural products such as contemporary Malay attire was also elaborated by Zakaria et al. (2024) in their research entitled “*The Influences of Contemporary Fashion to the Development of Men’s Baju Melayu in Malaysia*”. Furthermore, the use of hijab by Malay women has maintained its presence within urban communities by adapting to market trends and contemporary tastes. Hassan et al. (2015) highlight how Malay women in Malaysia negotiate their fashion choices within urban culture, as shifting gender roles, particularly the move from being solely housewives to being more career-oriented or professional identities, yet still aligns with religious obligations as a woman.

As well as in linguistic aspect, the use of Manglish (Malaysian English), Singlish (Singapore English), marks a negotiation of identity and reflect the blending of local and global traditions. According to several scholars, this blending of languages considers as bridges across ethnic differences, enriching social interactions through lexical creativity, syntactic flexibility, and cultural references, “Manglish is more than a hybrid language-it is a dynamic symbol of Malaysia's cultural resilience and adaptability in a globalized world” (AlAfnan et al., 2025). Moreover, Yusof et al. (2023) state that Manglish is a reflection of collective identity and social solidarity among Malaysian youth. In contrast, Singlish, was once discouraged by the government in formal context, due to its perceived hindrance to national progress. Nevertheless, most of public continue to use Singlish as a means of expressing national identity and as a tool for social cohesion (Ching, 2020). Thus, the linguistic hybridity reflects the ambivalence described by Bhabha (1994), which posits that the practice of imitating the dominant language (in the context of colonizer-colonized relations) is an effort to equalize, yet remain different. In this context, Manglish (Malaysia) and Singlish (Singapore) emerged as imitations of English with new grammar, dialects, and formats that are similar but not identical. This phenomenon simultaneously becomes a politics of language and automatically legitimizes their national identity collectively.

Besides that, the simplification of marriage in contemporary Malay society has moved away from sacred cultural values toward more consumerist practices, driven by modern expectations that prioritize social status, prestige, trends and costs. Cultural capitalism due to modernization and western influences has created social pressure in the context of wedding ceremonies (Sallehuddin et al., 2020). these practices impose significant financial burdens and increase the risk of falling into debt traps (Koe & Yeoh, 2021).

Thus, Malay identity in visual form does not disappear. Rather, it has transformed through contemporary aesthetics. Rather, it is not a fixed or final entity. The tension between tradition and modernity continues to be curated not only in physical social spaces but also within the digital ecosystem, where hybrid symbols are produced, commented on, and discussed by virtual communities. The shift from a cultural dilemma to an active and complex negotiation of identity

signifies a growing acceptance of cultural hybridity and glocalization as strategies for sustaining cultural resilience, while also acknowledging the ongoing challenges and contradictions that accompany these transformations. Glocalization, as conceptualized by Robertson (1995) refers to the simultaneous interplay between globalizing forces and local cultural particularities, where global influences are not simply imposed but are selectively adapted and reinterpreted within local contexts. This dynamic process enables communities to assert cultural agency, producing hybrid forms that are both rooted in tradition and responsive to global currents.

NARRATIVE HYBRIDIZATION OF MALAY IDENTITY IN THE REINTERPRETATION OF GENEALOGIES, RESISTANCE AND FAITH

Beyond the tangible, TikTok serves as a digital archive for narrative hybridization, particularly in topic related to genealogy, history, and theology. Traditional discourses on various theories of Malay migration such as from Yunnan, Champa, or through Austronesian and Polynesian traces are reflected in user-generated narratives on social media. These narratives operate transnationally, transcending exclusive ethno-national categories such as Malaysia Malay or Indonesian Malay. The widespread distribution of Malay-related content on TikTok demonstrates the dominance of topics on genealogy and the history of Malay origins as a wide-open field of interpretation across multiple versions of chronicles. User participation is evident in how they review, interpret, and re-share historical narratives openly, collaboratively and organically, within a digital landscape that enables the renegotiation of what “Malay” means today.

Yet, beyond notions of “Malay” origins, the findings also show how the “feeling of being Malay” is worth considering today, an identity not solely defined by claims of lineage, but also shaped through lived experience and sense of “being” as seen in the “*kacukan*” Malay community from mixed marriages. Affection, family memories, language, and symbolic connections with Malay culture, are among the factors that lead them associate with Malays. In line with the concept described by Hoskins (2016) “identity negotiation”, a condition in which collective memory is no longer centralized under authoritative or official standards, but is collaboratively constructed on social media, giving rise to new memories.

Meanwhile, historical and cultural struggles within a socio-political context are reflected in topics such as betrayal, resistance, colonialism, rebellion, sovereignty, and various ongoing tensions throughout the process of national identity formation. The long journey, historical wounds, and collective memory, continuously discussed on social media, have led Malays community to embrace modern governance within a nationalist framework. Contemporary Malay society sustains its identity by revisiting memories of colonialism, historical legacies, struggles, and local heroism, thereby nurturing a continued spirit of resilience.

In addition, within other narrative contexts, classical Islamic discourses such as Sufism have also been reinterpreted in the contemporary digital space. Esoteric concepts such as *ma'rifat* (spiritual knowledge) and *laduni* (divine knowledge), which are part of the Islamic mystical tradition, were once transmitted exclusively in private spaces such as *surau* or exclusive gatherings. Today, however, they appear alongside common themes such as worship, prayer, and daily Islamic practices on social media. Followed by eschatological narratives, which emerge through references of the final chapter of life, *Yaumul Akhir*, *Mahdi*, and *Tamim*, shaping the community's imagination with apocalyptic themes that blend theological certainty with symbolic interpretation.

Thus, we conclude this discussion chapter by supporting Homi Bhabha's theory of the Third Space (Bhabha, 1994), while also referring to Tatham (2025), who emphasizes that the core of this post-colonial theory of the Third Space lies in transformation and liberation. Meaning, social media serves as a third space for Malay communities to redefine their identity

within global transformation, through reinterpretation and the freedom of expression of their self-identification as Malay.

TRANSFORMATION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN DIGITAL AGE

This research provides a clear image of how Malay cultural identity is currently being formed through the intersection of cultural heritage, colonial memories, globalization, and the rise of media and digital technology. As our discussion before on "Tangible Hybridization", cultural symbols such as clothing, language, and social practices are not lost; instead, they are transformed and re-presented in the digital space, producing new aesthetics that still reflect traditional symbols. Meanwhile, as outlined in "Narrative Hybridization", historical memory, genealogy, and religious discourse are now interpreted collectively through social media, no longer monopolized by a single authority.

As the conceptualization of these findings, we propose a model of the Transformation of Cultural Identity, which intersects cultural heritage, colonial memories, globalization, and digital technology as interrelated factors. Rather than acting in isolation, these elements converge to produce ongoing cultural redefinitions, where tradition is preserved as well as reformulated, building on past struggles, current global influences are selectively adapted. The model emphasizes that contemporary cultural identity is no longer merely inherited conventionally but is continuously transformed through the intersection of these four factors in social media.

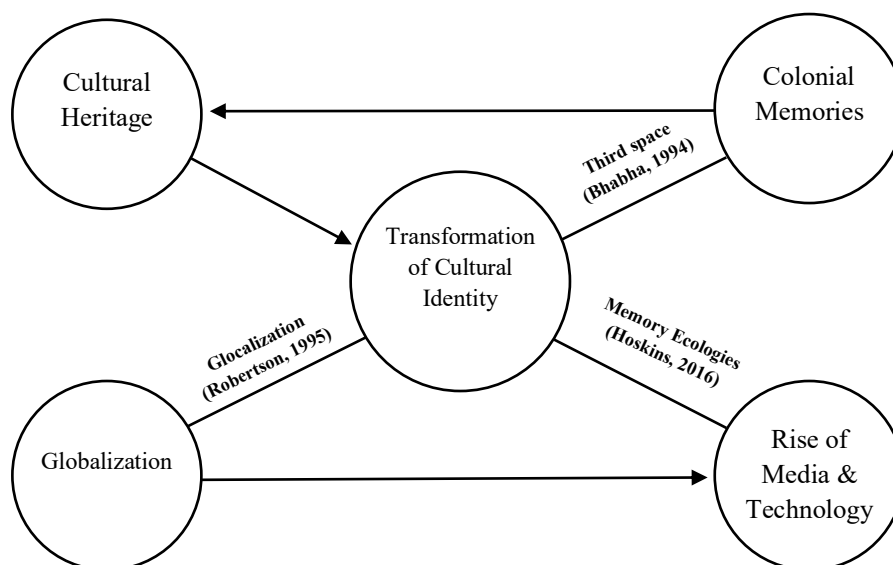


FIGURE 4. Process of Transformation of Cultural Identity in Digital Age

The transformation of cultural identity is shaped through the interaction of several key factors: cultural heritage provides the foundation of identity, despite it being sometimes reformulated, and colonial memories reciprocally shape identity, meaning that while these memories influence how identity is formed, the understanding of one's identity also affects how these colonial memories are interpreted. While digital media and technology play a key role in the transformation and representation of identity, globalization drives the process of hybridization and cultural selection that shapes cultural identity contemporarily.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that contemporary Malay identity on social media, especially TikTok, is shaped through a complex process of negotiation between traditional values and global modernity. This identity appears in three main cultural dimensions: products, perspectives, and practices, which reflect the dynamics of cultural hybridity. Malay identity is no longer limited by ethnonational borders. Instead, it is rebuilt across national lines, through stories and visuals, with active user participation in sharing, interpreting, and discussing the meaning of being Malay in digital spaces. This shows that TikTok is not just a platform for entertainment. It also acts as a digital archive and a discursive space that forms collective memory, brings back old narratives, and questions the boundaries of cultural identity. This process creates space for hybridity between tradition and modernity, between classical Islam and urban life, and between nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

This study strengthens the understanding of cultural identity through a digital and transnational approach. It supports the concepts of cultural hybridity and glocalization in the social media context, as reflected in our findings of tangible and narrative hybridization discussed previously. These findings also help broaden Hoskins's concept of memory ecologies, where collective memory is not confined to official institutions but is instead formed, circulated, and continually transformed through social interactions within digital connectivity. Furthermore, these findings empirically extend Bhabha's concept of hybridity about fluid, ambivalent, and constantly negotiated identities in his third space theory by operationalizing it into two observable dimensions: tangible (material and visual forms) and narrative (discursive and symbolic constructions) within digital environments. Taken together, cultural heritage, colonial memories, globalization, and the momentum of media technology development illustrate how cultural identities are transformed.

Practically, these findings can support discussions on developing digital content within the local cultural sphere in a more dynamic way. The evolution of TikTok into a platform that enhances cultural and historical literacy among youth represents an advantageous area as a collective space for fostering and engaging them in cultural discourse to be more adaptable to changing times. Digital practices such as these help the Malay community maintain its cultural identity without rejecting modern life. At the same time, these digital practices open up spaces for intercultural dialogue in today's increasingly diverse society.

As our closing statement, Malay identity in the digital era is continually transforming at the intersection of four forces: cultural heritage, colonial memories, the dynamics of globalization, and media technology. Hybridization (both tangible and narrative) presents a strategic opportunity to nurture, strengthen, and project Malay culture adaptively and inclusively.

The limitations of this study lie in its exclusive focus on data derived from TikTok, which does not fully represent the broader digital media landscape. Additionally, the study concentrates on symbolic and narrative representations rather than observable public behavior. Although the researchers made every effort to collect TikTok comment data using a non-logged-in mode, the possibility of algorithmic bias cannot be entirely ruled out. Accordingly, future research is encouraged to be conducted on several digital platforms using more comprehensive data crawling techniques. More importantly, future studies should directly engage the Malays through qualitative approaches such as focus group discussions (FGDs) to capture their perceptions, lived experiences, and the challenges they encounter in shaping their Malay identities. Such an approach would not only deepen our understanding of cultural hybridity in the digital sphere but also provide richer contextual insights into how Malay people negotiate their cultural identities in everyday life amid the pressures of modernity.

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