

Fractured Identity in Multicultural Spaces: A Study of Contemporary Cultural Tensions

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Abstract:

In a multicultural society that continues to grow, cultural identity no longer exists as a static inheritance, but as a social construct that is constantly negotiated. This research aims to understand how individuals respond to identity tensions in plural social spaces, as well as how identity representations are exercised, maintained, or negotiated through symbolic strategies and everyday practices. Using an interpretive qualitative approach and a mini-ethnographic design, data were collected through in-depth interviews and participatory observations of 15 informants from diverse ethnic backgrounds in the city of Makassar. The results of the study show that individuals face various forms of cultural tension, both in the form of stereotypes, assimilation demands, and multiple identity dilemmas. However, they also respond actively through symbolic representation, subtle resistance, and the creation of a more reflective hybrid identity. This process shows that identity is not just a cultural label, but the result of symbolic interactions, power relations, and complex social dynamics. This research contributes to a new understanding of the importance of seeing identity as a contextual, performative, and political process. The results have implications for the development of more inclusive and equitable social policies in responding to cultural diversity.

Keywords: Cultural identity; Multicultural spaces; Representation; Hybridity: Cultural tensions.

1. Introduction

In a world that is increasingly connected and intersecting, the diversity of cultural identities is no longer just a social feature, but a reality that shapes the face of daily life. Major cities in Indonesia—such as Makassar, Jakarta, and Yogyakarta—have become intense meeting spaces between ethnic, religious, linguistic, and lifestyle backgrounds (Cahyono et al., 2024; Laila & Irwan Abdullah, 2022; Latif et al., 2025). However, these meetings did not always take place in harmony. Behind the rhetoric of multiculturalism that is often predicted to be the face of tolerance, there are much more complex and sometimes tense dynamics (Mansour & Milne, 2014; Urbiola et al., 2021). This tension is present in the form of stereotypes, symbolic marginalization, and identity confusion experienced by individuals in navigating their lives (Jost et al., 2005; Klein & Bernard, 2015).

The fundamental problem lies not in diversity itself, but in how it is managed, represented, and responded to in real social life (Barreto & Ellemers, 2009; Byrd, 2014). Society is often trapped in the old dichotomy: between the "original" and the "foreign", between the "dominant" and the "minority" (Leimgruber, 2018; Schurr, 2010). In this cross-cultural social space, identity is not something that is fixed or purely inherited. It is something that is negotiated continuously, through symbols, language, social practices, and representation in public spaces (Abbey, 2004; Dominelli, 2022; Luring, 2008).

In this context, Stuart Hall's (1996, 1997) theory becomes very relevant. Hall states that identity is a process of representation that is never completed (Coelho, 2014; Connell & Pugliese, 2017). It is not essentially attached to the individual but rather is formed in a discursive process involving power, collective narratives, and social relations (Sindic et al., 2014). Similarly, the concept of third space proposed by Homi K. Bhabha (1994) provides an important lens for reading identity as a product of the space between them—a place where two cultures interact, rub shoulders and give birth to new forms that cannot be fully returned to their origin (Edirisinghe et al., 2011; Ika & Wagner, 2008; Omar, 2021). This in-between space creates a hybrid form of identity: an identity that is impure, not final, but is instead full of reflective and creative potential (Beltran, 2004; Nziba Pindi, 2018; Ryan, 2014).

Various studies have raised the importance of cultural representation in multicultural contexts. Studies such as that of Ien Ang (2001) on the Asian diaspora, as well as works in the fields of cultural studies and urban anthropology, show that contemporary identities are increasingly performative, contextual, and fluid (Linger, n.d.; Wan, 2012, 2015). However, in the Indonesian context, especially in cities that are experiencing rapid urbanization such as Makassar, the study of identity tension is still more limited to the normative level—often framed in a narrative of harmony or the spirit of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* that is not problematic (Pangalila et al., 2024; Surya, 2014; Surya et al., 2021).

Even though the social reality shows the opposite. On campus, in the workplace, and social media spaces, individuals from minority or multicultural backgrounds often face representation dilemmas (Alteri, 2020; Ng & Sears, 2010). They feel they have to adjust to being accepted, but in the process, they are also in danger of losing a part of their authentic selves (Westfall, 2020). In a field interview, for example, a student of Bugis-Toraja descent revealed how he "had to appear as a neutral version of himself" to avoid the stereotypes attached to the dual identity (Blazejewski, 2012; Ng Tseung-Wong et al., 2019). Experiences like these have not received much space in academic discourse (Abdelaziz et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2017).

This research gap is what this study aims to answer. This study departs from the assumption that multicultural spaces are not neutral arenas, but are full of symbolic power dynamics (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023; Tatham, 2023). Identity representation is not only produced through the way we dress, language, and food, but also through educational policies, media narratives, and social standards that are not always inclusive (Alves, 2017; Hijano del Rio & Martín Zúñiga, 2022). In such spaces, identity can be a source of creativity, but it can also be a source of stress and feelings of insecurity (Glăveanu & Tanggaard, 2014; Round, 2021).

This research tries to offer novelty in two dimensions. First, empirically, this study presents qualitative data based on the narratives of individuals who experienced and responded to identity tensions in their real lives (Guo & Kramer, 2024; Seville-Liu, 2023). Using a micro-ethnographic approach, these narratives are not only complementary but central to the analysis (Durocher, 2022; Tutenges, 2019). Second, theoretically, this study juxtaposes the concept of Hall's representation with the idea of third space from Bhabha to read identity as a process that continues to change and is influenced by the negotiation of meaning, power, and hybridity in a plural social space (BRODERICK, 2019; Coelho, 2014).

Through this approach, this article aims to show that identity in multicultural spaces cannot be read in fixed terms such as "we" versus "them", or "native" versus "foreign" (Patron, 2019; Sinnott, 2017). The identity that emerges is often a form of synthesis: a combination of subjective experience, social pressure, and strategies for survival and acceptance (Ermann, 2011; Wilson et al., 2009). Individuals are not just objects that passively receive cultural labels from the outside, but also actors who actively assemble, reorganize, and champion their meanings (Wan & Chew, 2013).

This study also wants to emphasize that the process of hybridization—although often seen as a sign of cultural openness—does not necessarily remove tensions (Bhat, 2019; Vestel, 2009). Conversely, hybridization can lead to identity ambiguity and even symbolic conflict, especially when cultural mixing is perceived as contaminating authenticity or being taken over without an understanding of its original meaning (Casinader & Manathunga, 2020; Hoon, 2021; Zhao et al., 2022). In these situations, identity resistance can arise, both subtly (e.g., maintaining regional languages) and openly (through criticism of stereotypes in the media) (Ahlers, 2017; Alland & Alland, 2006).

To capture this complexity, this article divides the discussion into several subthemes, including the representation of identity in intercultural interactions, power relations in the formation of identity, the production and reproduction of meaning through media and symbols, shifting values and conflicts of meaning, and the expression of hybridity in everyday life. Each subtheme is supported by field interviews, narrative analysis, and representational theory frameworks.

At the end of the article, this article will conclude that identity in a multicultural space is never static or pure. It is a story that continues to be written—coloured by encounters, battles of meaning, resistance, and hope. By placing identity as a contextual, performative, and political process, this study hopes to contribute to the development of contemporary cultural literature, while opening up space for reflection to formulate more equitable social strategies for managing diversity.

As such, this article is important not only for academic studies of identity, but also for policymakers, educational practitioners, community activists, and anyone involved in pluralistic social life. During a world that continues to move, understanding the complexity of identity is no longer an option, but a necessity.

2. Method

This study uses an interpretive qualitative approach with a mini ethnographic design. This approach was chosen because it follows the main objective of the study: to understand the dynamics of identity in multicultural spaces in depth through the perspective of the actors. Rather than simply measuring variables, this approach allows researchers to explore subjective experiences, symbolic meanings, as well as representational processes that take place in everyday social interactions. Thus, this method is very suitable for dissecting the complexity of identity issues, cultural tensions, and hybridity that are the focus of the study.

The research was carried out in several stages. The first stage is the determination of location and social context, which in this case focuses on urban areas in Makassar—especially campus environments, creative communities, and multicultural boarding houses that are the meeting point of various cultural backgrounds. The second stage is the collection of field data, which is carried out through participatory observation and in-depth interviews. The next stage is narrative transcription and interpretation, where data is processed to find patterns of representation, resistance, and identity negotiation. The final stage is theoretical analysis and writing, where the findings are associated with the framework of Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha's thinking, and complemented by other supporting literature.

The research subjects are individuals who are in the middle of a multicultural space and have direct experience related to identity negotiations. They consist of students, creative workers, teachers, community activists, and other individuals from different ethnic backgrounds, such as Bugis, Toraja, Javanese, Chinese, and Papuans. The objects of the research are the forms of representation of identity they display, the social responses they face, and the symbolic and social strategies they use to navigate diversity.

The researchers used several research indicators to dissect these dynamics, including:

- Representation of identity through language, symbols, and lifestyle;
- Experience of cultural tensions in social interactions;
- Patterns of adaptation, resistance, or hybridization of identities;
- Narratives that thrive in communities and social media;
- Power relations and stereotypes that affect identity recognition.

The main data sources came from in-depth interviews with 15 purposively selected informants—based on their experiences relevant to the context of multiculturalism and identity tensions. The interview technique is semi-structured, allowing researchers to explore the informant's narrative experiences flexibly. In addition, participatory observations were also carried out in community activities, campus discussions, and online social forums to capture the practice of representation and cross-identity interaction in natural situations.

The informant determination technique is based on the principles of snowball sampling and purposive sampling. The researcher started with key informants who were already known to have multicultural backgrounds or cross-identity life experiences, then expanded the network based on the informant's previous recommendations and social connections. This strategy was chosen because it provides an opportunity to capture unusual or hidden experiences, which are important for understanding the nuances of identity dynamics contextually.

The data obtained were analyzed using thematic-narrative analysis techniques. This analysis starts with the identification of key themes based on interview transcripts and field notes. Each narrative is interpreted in depth by looking at the social context, the use of symbols, and the relationship to power structures and dominant narratives. The results of the analysis were then compared with the theoretical concepts of Hall and Bhabha, especially related to representation, third space, and hybridity. In this way, the analysis is not only descriptive but also reflective and interpretive.

In the implementation of this research, the researcher pays close attention to qualitative research ethics. All informants were given an explanation in advance about the purpose of the research, the method of data collection, and their right to stop at any time without consequences. Verbal and written consent is collected before the interview is conducted. The names of the informants in this report have been redacted to maintain their confidentiality and convenience. In addition, the researcher ensures that the interview and observation process takes place in a safe atmosphere, respects each other, and does not corner the identity of the informant.

This research method was consciously chosen because it can capture the relationship between symbols, power, and social experiences that shape identity in multicultural spaces. The validity of the data was strengthened by triangulation of sources (interviews and observations) and reconfirmation of findings to several key informants after the initial analysis process. The reliability of results is not measured through repetition but through the depth of interpretation and relevance to the social context studied.

Overall, the methods used are in line with the research objectives, which are to explore identity tensions in plural social spaces, as well as to understand how individuals respond to them through representations and symbolic strategies. By prioritizing a reflective and ethnographic approach, this research not only offers a description of the phenomenon but also provides a critical understanding of the identity politics that work subtly behind our daily lives.

3. Results and discussion

In a multicultural social space, identity does not emerge as a single or fixed entity, but rather as an ongoing negotiation process. The results of this study show that individual experiences in navigating cultural diversity are often ambivalent—they contain both opportunities and pressures. Through field observations and in-depth interviews with 15 informants from diverse cultural backgrounds, patterns of representation, resistance, and expression of hybridity were revealed that reveal the complex faces of contemporary identity constructions.

3.1. Identity Representation and Social Strategy

One of the key findings of the study is that identity is strategically represented by individuals in everyday life, both visually and symbolically. This representation appears in the form of language choices, dress styles, expression of values, and social media.

For example, in an interview with a Toraja student who lives in a multicultural boarding house in Makassar, he stated:

"At first I tried to neutralize my accent, afraid of being considered strange or outdated. But over time I realized, that the accent is part of me. Now I'm proud, sometimes I deliberately bring it up in conversations so that people know where I'm from."

This statement shows the dynamics of adaptation and identity affirmation at the same time. Representation is not just an outward appearance, but a social strategy that allows individuals to remain "intact" in a space that demands adjustment. This is consistent with the thought of Stuart Hall (1997) who states that representation is the process of producing meaning through language, symbols, and social practices that are political and full of negotiations.

3.2. Cultural Tensions and Identity Politics

In the context of a multicultural space, tensions between identities are often inevitable. This tension arises especially when individuals must choose between maintaining the cultural values of origin or conforming to dominant norms.

A Bugis-Chinese informant working in the creative sector said:

"I often feel that I am too Chinese to be called Bugis, but also not enough Chinese for the Chinese community. Finally, I used the two identities according to the place and time. On the one hand, it's liberating, but sometimes it's also exhausting."

These findings show that identity tensions are not only about cultural differences but also about social positions and representations attached to the surrounding environment. Homi Bhabha's theory of the third space helps explain this ambiguity as a creative space as well as a pressure space. In the third space, individuals create new forms of identity that cannot be rigidly categorized as "original"

or "foreign."

The study also found that identity tensions are stronger when there are unbalanced power relations in representation. Identities that are considered "modern", "urban", or "national" often gain greater recognition, while local or minority identities have to work harder to gain a place. This is in line with Hall's critique of the dominant narrative that produces partial and biased representations in public spaces.

3.3. Hybridity and the Creation of New Identities

Although full of tension, multicultural spaces also open up the possibility for the emergence of hybrid identities—identities formed from the conscious and creative mixing of two or more cultures. This identity is not pure but rather shows the individual's ability to reassemble his or her meaning.

One of the informants, a student of Mining-Toraja descent, described her experience as follows:

"I like to mix my two cultures. She wears a traditional dress but her hair is braided in a Torah style. People are confused sometimes, but for me, it's a way of showing that I'm both, and also no one as a whole."

This phenomenon is also documented through observations on digital content. Some informants actively use social media to showcase their multicultural identities—by including local symbols in graphic design, bilingual captions, or posts that mix regional cultural and linguistic values with global trends. This shows that digital identity is becoming a new space for hybrid expression that is performative and open.

3.4. Resistance to Symbolic Marginalization

On the other hand, there are also forms of resistance to dominant representations that are considered to simplify or negate the original identity. This resistance is not always in the form of confrontation but is present in the form of symbol selection, rejection of stereotypes, and criticism of public narratives.

One of the young teachers of Madurese descent stated:

"At school, I used to change my nickname to be more 'national', but now I am starting to use my real name again. I want my students to know that my name is part of my history."

This resistance can be read as a form of "representation politics from below" that individuals carry out to maintain autonomy over the meaning of their identity. This context reinforces Hall's argument that identity struggles always take place in a discursive terrain where meaning is constantly produced, contested, and revised.

3.5. Comparison with Previous Studies

The findings in this study are in line with various contemporary studies on identity and multiculturalism. For example, Ien Ang's (2001) research on diaspora identity shows that individuals living in cross-cultural cultures tend to create flexible and contextual identities. However, this study adds a local dimension by showing that identity tensions are also influenced by colonial social and historical structures that are still imprinted in patterns of representation.

In contrast to several studies that emphasize the harmony of multiculturalism in the Indonesian context, this study shows that diversity is often a field of conflict of meaning that is not always resolved properly. This tension is proof that multicultural spaces are not automatically inclusive, but must be pursued through social and political strategies of fair representation.

3.6. Interpretation and Implications of the Findings

In general, the results of this study confirm that identity is a dynamic, negotiable, and political process. The representation of identity is never neutral but is influenced by social positions, access to the media, and power relations that work subtly and explicitly. Individuals in multicultural spaces are not just "being themselves", but must constantly negotiate between cultural loyalty and the need to be accepted in social spaces.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. In the context of education policy, for example, there needs to be greater space for diverse expressions of identity without having to standardize values. In the world of media, it is necessary to develop a fairer representation of minority groups so that stereotypes do not repeat. In society at large, it is important to encourage spaces of dialogue that allow for an equal exchange of meaning.

4. Conclusion

This research has succeeded in showing that identity in multicultural spaces is not something that is fixed, intact, or free from disturbances. On the contrary, identity exists as a construction that is constantly grappling in a complex social field—coloured by negotiations, shifting values, symbolic representations, and power dynamics that work subtly and overtly. The initial goal of understanding how identity is represented, negotiated, and even defended in conditions of social tension is successfully answered through an ethnographic approach that places subjective experience at the centre of the analysis.

The findings suggest that individuals are not passive in the face of dominant narratives. They become active actors in reimagining the meaning of themselves, although sometimes they have to pay a price in the form of uncertainty, ambiguity, or even social pressure. The representation of identity is not only displayed through symbols and lifestyles, but also silence, word choice, rejection

of stereotypes, and calculating daily social practices. In this case, identity is proven not only to be the result of inheritance but also the result of reflective and strategic social work.

Another achievement of this research is the strengthening of the understanding that cultural tensions in multicultural spaces do not necessarily become an obstacle to social cohesion. It can be a productive space for the emergence of hybrid forms of identity that are more flexible, more creative, and better able to bridge differences. However, this is only possible if there is a collective awareness that the representation of identity is a political field, not just a matter of aesthetics or self-expression. Without this awareness, multiculturalism will only become a rhetorical packaging that leaves a wound of representation for those who are not accommodated. Thus, this study confirms that understanding identity means understanding the social work that accompanies it—the work of negotiation between the personal and the structural, between attachment and freedom, and between adjustment and resistance. In a world that is constantly moving and intersecting, the courage to assemble identities consciously and contextually becomes the most important form of cultural resilience. Thus, multicultural spaces are not only a place to live together, but also an arena for each individual to continue to rewrite who he or she is—without having to lose roots, and without feeling alien in their land.

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