

# Constructing hybrid identity on TikTok: A virtual ethnographic study of Indonesian influencers in Japan

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the phenomenon of influencers' diaspora in Indonesia and Japan, using a virtual ethnographic approach to understand how influencers' digital identities are formed and received by audiences. This framework guides the author in exploring four levels: media space, media documents, media objects, and media experience. The data included videos and comments discussing cultural interaction and the Indonesian and Japanese languages, in the time frame 2024-2025. The findings reveal that both influencers construct hybrid cultural spaces on TikTok that foster ongoing dialogue between Indonesian and Japanese audiences. Through symbolic visuals, humor, and bilingual narratives, present adaptive identity performances that reflect both personal and collective experiences. Taste ethnographic show engagement with cultural values and shared identity, indicating the emergence of a digital "third space" for intercultural exchange.

## Keywords

Digital diaspora, Identity negotiation, Influencers, TikTok, Virtual ethnography

## Introduction

The rapid development of social media has expanded the space for digital identity formation, with platforms such as TikTok now becoming an essential arena for cross-cultural self-representation practices [1], [2]. The phenomenon of increasing global mobility has led diaspora communities to increasingly rely on digital spaces to maintain and negotiate their identities. Indonesian diaspora influencers in Japan have begun featuring hybrid Indonesian-Japanese content, demonstrating cultural interactions that are no longer confined to physical spaces. With the advent of various social media applications, these have become central elements in the process of identity formation [3]. Amidst the high consumption of TikTok audio-visual content, the process of

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negotiating transnational identity is becoming increasingly complex and requires a deeper scientific understanding.

Previous research has focused on how Indonesians adapt to Japanese culture, both in the virtual world and in Japan. Indonesian migrants in Japan, including families, workers, and students, show a strong commitment to preserving their cultural identity [4]. Mayasari revealed a hybridity of Japanese and Indonesian cultures through a process of cultural adaptation and consumption of Japanese popular culture [5]. Online communities no longer function as passive receivers of institutional communication but instead emerge as agenda-building actors who shape meanings, contest legitimacy, and articulate civic resistance within algorithmically mediated spaces [6].

The emergence of platforms such as TikTok has expanded the terrain of digital identity formation, particularly among diaspora communities who negotiate cultural belonging in transnational online spaces. Prior studies demonstrate that Indonesian migrants maintain cultural attachments while adapting to host-society norms, resulting in hybrid identity performances within virtual environments [6], [7], [8]. Thus, the novelty of this research offers insight into how the Indonesian diaspora in Japan negotiates its identity through TikTok, a social media platform.

In this study, TikTok, an audiovisual content-based social media platform, offers unique dynamics for identity negotiation. Through its interactive features, influencers not only provide entertainment but also showcase cultural, languages, and lifestyles that bring together their original identities and new identities influenced by transnational environments, resulting in syncretic cultural experiences in the digital space [9]. This digital space ultimately gave rise to the phenomenon of “digital diaspora,” in which identity is no longer tied to a single physical location, but rather becomes hybrid, fluid, and constantly constructed through virtual interactions that transcend national borders [10].

Individual identity is no longer limited to physical space; it extends into the virtual world as well. Identity reflects each individual’s attitude [11]. According to Bergen & Breithwaite, etymologically, the term “identity” derives from the meaning of sameness, referring to the concept of similarity or similar existence. Meanwhile, according to Cooley, identity is understood as a process in which individuals define and assess themselves through the perspectives of others, as a form of response to the perception of the self that is formed, whether based on reality or imaginary constructs [12]. It also develops and intertwines in a virtual space that is increasingly globally connected [13]. Identity can be understood as a representation of the self that influences individual attitudes and behaviors. In addition, identity reflects self-perception, is shaped by others’ views, and strengthens an individual’s awareness of their own existence [14], [15].

This study integrates dramaturgical perspectives (Goffman) and the concept of hybridity (Bhabha) to analyze how individuals perform, negotiate, and stabilize their identity within transnational digital spaces [16], [17], [18]. In this global ecosystem of digital diaspora, new figures with significant influence have emerged, namely digital influencers of the diaspora. They not only share personal narratives but also serve as cultural intermediaries, representing life abroad to audiences in their home countries. In recent years, the phenomenon of digital influencers has grown significantly [19]. There are three main dimensions in assessing an influencer. First, reach, which refers to the number of followers an influencer has. Second, resonance, which refers to the level of engagement or interaction among followers. Third, relevance, which describes the suitability between the values embraced by influencers and the image of the brand being promoted [20]. This compatibility can also be reflected through similarities in values, culture, and demographic characteristics between the content produced by influencers and their audience [21].

This phenomenon demonstrates how the digital space not only reproduces existing identities but also creates a layered arena of negotiation between personal, national, and global identities, thereby becoming an essential field for understanding how digital diaspora identities are constructed and negotiated in the era of digital disruption. These two specific accounts, @megakenichiro\_official and @rappa800, were purposefully selected because they stand out as the most prominent Indonesian diaspora creators in Japan, possessing the largest follower bases and consistently achieving virality on the TikTok For Your Page (#FYP). Beyond their massive reach, they represent a unique dichotomy of the diaspora experience: one showcases the intimate, cross-cultural domestic negotiations of a mixed marriage, while the other portrays the distinct struggles and adaptations of a migrant worker navigating fatherhood abroad. Therefore, in this study, the researcher aims to describe the forms of identity-negotiation activities displayed by Indonesian influencers in Japan through the TikTok accounts @megakenichiro\_official and @rappa800, using a virtual ethnographic approach.

## Method

This research uses a qualitative method to gain a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon, within a constructivist paradigm that focuses on the various realities constructed by individuals and the impact of these constructions on their lives and on others. Therefore, research using this approach recognizes that each individual's perspective on the world has value and that diverse perspectives should be respected [22]. The research approach employed was virtual ethnography, a method that seeks to reflect both the visible and invisible realities within a group through observation [23]. This theory focuses on social observation in digital spaces to understand the cultures, practices, and norms that form within them [24].

This study uses the first data collection technique, non-participant observation, where the researcher does not position themselves as a member of the group. This observation is classified as passive participation, a method in which the researcher is present at the location of the group activity being studied but does not assume a role or become directly involved in the group's activities [25]. Second, the researchers obtained documentation from the TikTok accounts @megakenichiro\_official and @rappa800, which featured videos showcasing cultural interactions and the use of Indonesian and Japanese languages. During the 2024-2025 time frame, an initial dataset comprising 999 videos and approximately 4,139,936 comments was collected. From this extensive pool, 100 videos and 1,000 comments were selected based on the depth of the Indonesian-Japanese identity negotiations depicted. These were systematically observed and analyzed to ensure the depth of virtual ethnographic observation through four levels of analysis in virtual ethnography, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Level virtual ethnographic [23]

Level	Object
Media Space	The structure of the media device and its appearance are related to the technical application procedures.
Media Archive	Content and aspects of the meaning of text as a cultural artifact.
Media Object	Interactions that occur on social media and communication that occurs between community members through comments and forums.
Experiential Stories	Motives, effects, and benefits that are connected online and offline in the form of recommendations.

## Results

We analyze and categorize identity negotiations on the TikTok accounts @megakenichiro\_official and @rappa800 into four levels, using Nasrullah's media analysis techniques. The researcher analyzes and categorizes identity negotiations on the TikTok accounts @megakenichiro\_official and @rappa800 into four levels of media analysis (space, documents, objects, and experience) [23].

Based on these analytical steps, this study will demonstrate identity negotiation practices within the digital diaspora influencer community and make a significant contribution to the field of digital communication and media studies. The practice of interaction and content production on the TikTok platform demonstrates that the digital space is not only used for entertainment but also for building collective identity, affection-based social relations, and a unique community language. This indicates that digital media serves as a complex cultural mediator, in which communication between community members has purposes that extend beyond mere information-seeking; it also has symbolic and performative functions. Therefore, these findings can help researchers and audiences understand how digital media shapes interaction, meaning structures, and the dynamics of diaspora communities.

### *Level of media space: TikTok as a showcase for “Japan with an Indonesian feels.”*

TikTok can convey emotional and direct messages through short videos, audio, and distinctive visuals [26]. TikTok creates a liminal zone that connects physical reality in Japan with the cognitive space of its Indonesian audience. Although the geotagging feature consistently points to physical locations in Japan, the For Your Page (FYP) algorithm and the selection of sounds that are trending in Indonesia draw the content back to its digital “homeland.”

The main findings at this level reveal a contrasting yet complementary division of symbolic space. The @megakenichiro\_official account uses domestic space (a typical Japanese small house, kitchen, family room) as its main stage, transforming private space into a cultural showcase where negotiations between a Javanese wife and a Japanese husband take place in an intimate setting. In contrast, @rappa800 uses private space as a backdrop to project the identity of a father living abroad. In this context, media space acts as a showcase for “Japanese with an Indonesian Feels,” allowing the audience to consume Japanese visuals, but with a distinctly Indonesian atmosphere.

### *Level of media document: Self-identity and cultural hybridity*

TikTok is designed for short video creation, allowing users to give individual presentations from their own scripts. Its content recommendation system promotes innovative and engaging videos, and when content goes viral, it often perfectly reflects users’ self-perceptions, helping to shape their identities [26]. The analysis highlights how caption texts, verbal language choices, and visual symbols are used to negotiate their position between two different cultures. These media documents provide empirical evidence of how subjects resist total assimilation and choose the path of acculturation.

@megakenichiro\_official strategically maintains her Javanese “medok” accent when interacting with her Japanese husband, creating a humorous contrast that emphasizes her authentic identity. Meanwhile, @rappa800 combines “batak” terms with the Japanese language. Visual findings reveal what is referred to as taste ethnography, in which cultural “tastes” are explicitly displayed. This is evident in Mega serving Indonesian dishes (such as tempeh and sambal) at a Japanese dining table, or Rappa showing the transition from a Japanese work mode to that of an Indonesian father. This document confirms that they adopt Japanese discipline without relinquishing their Indonesian attributes.

### *Level of media object: Interaction and identity validation diaspora*

Social media platforms are recognized for significantly shaping social identities by providing a unique environment for diverse social relationships. They facilitate the formation of communities across physical boundaries and encourage new forms of

social engagement [27]. Social media can be a platform for competing for meaning and public opinion [28]. These digital spaces enable a more authentic negotiation of identity, characterized by strategic boundary and contextual self-disclosure [29].

The comment sections on both accounts have evolved into discussion forums for the diaspora, providing a space for Indonesians to express their sense of belonging. There is a pattern of diaspora identity validation. The audience not only acts as passive viewers but is also emotionally involved, providing validation through pride, empathy, and a sense of kinship (relatability). Comments such as “Mitsuki Boru” or “Mewakili ibu-ibu Indonesia” position these two influencers as “informal cultural ambassadors.” There is an exchange of practical information about migration and cultural adaptation. These interactions strengthen a shared identity as Indonesians who can survive abroad.

### *Level of experience: Motives and meanings behind the content*

Social media platforms serve as a cultural unifier, where cultural identity is maintained and perpetuated in the face of an unattainable physical homeland [30]. This analysis penetrates the surface layer of entertainment to understand the psychological and sociological aspects of the research subject. The narrative is constructed not merely for popularity but as a survival mechanism in a foreign environment.

The analysis reveals that humor and narratives of struggle are used as coping mechanisms to address the challenges of being a minority in Japan. Behind the comedy videos are narratives about homesickness, culture shock, and work pressure. For @megakenichiro\_official, content serves to normalize cultural differences within his household. For @rappa800, content is a medium for humanizing the image of migrant workers who are also fathers. These personal experiences create strong and authentic emotional bonds with the audience.

## **Discussion**

The findings of this study illuminate how TikTok serves as more than a mere broadcasting platform for Indonesian influencers in Japan it functions as a complex instrument for identity negotiation. While previous studies on migration often highlight the marginalization or assimilation pressure faced by diaspora communities (indicating a loss of original identity to survive), this research offers a contrasting perspective. The cases of @megakenichiro\_official and @rappa800 demonstrate that digital media empowers migrants to perform strategic acculturation rather than total assimilation. They successfully curate a “hybrid self” in which Indonesian cultural markers are not hidden but commodified as their primary digital asset.

This study extends the concept of virtual ethnography by highlighting the role of “taste ethnography” in digital engagement. The visual presentation of specific cultural tastes, such as Mega’s persistence in serving tempe in a Japanese household or Arnasip’s use of calling his children “Boru,” validates the argument that cultural identity in the digital

age is fluid and performative. This clarifies findings from previous studies on digital diaspora, suggesting that the “longing for home” is no longer a passive nostalgia, but a production of content that invites the audience to participate in the “Indonesian experience” abroad. Furthermore, interaction observed at the media object reveals that the validity of a diaspora identity is co-constructed.

The audience in Indonesia plays a crucial role in legitimizing the influencers’ status as “cultural ambassadors.” Building on the concept of ‘taste ethnography,’ a dynamic feedback loop emerges between creators and their audience, in which follower requests actively steer future content. Specifically, audiences frequently demand a hyper-authentic representation of ‘Indonesian-ness’ by asking the influencers to showcase their children navigating a trilingual reality: speaking Japanese, Indonesian, and traditional regional languages (Javanese or Batak). By accommodating these requests, the influencers not only satisfy the audience’s craving for localized cultural preservation but also solidify their own performative hybridity. This creates a dialogue that contradicts the notion of the internet as a space of alienation; instead, it reveals a space of intense emotional connection and shared identity. The humor and struggle narratives (experiential stories) employed by the subjects serve as a bridge, reducing the psychological distance between Japan’s “dreamland” and Indonesia’s reality.

However, an unexpected nuance emerges in the commodification of “struggle.” While Rappa frames his figure as a father in a foreign country, and Mega frames her domestic challenges as cross-cultural humor, there is a risk of romanticizing the precarity of migrant life. This suggests that while the digital space offers empowerment, it also requires a performative positivity that might obscure the harsher structural realities of living in Japan. Nevertheless, the primary contribution of these findings lies in the evidence that TikTok facilitates a “Digital Third Space,” where the binary opposition between “Indonesian” and “Japanese” is deconstructed, allowing a new hybrid identity.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the identity negotiation of Indonesian influencers in Japan through the lens of virtual ethnography. The research confirms that the digital space allows them to maintain strong ties to their cultural roots while physically navigating a foreign environment, effectively turning cultural differences into social and digital capital. The primary finding of this study is that digital interaction in this context is not merely transactional or informational, but also deeply symbolic. Influencers effectively utilize cultural symbols, language, food, and work ethic to build a community centered on affect and relatability. This study contributes to the field of digital communication by providing empirical evidence that marginalized groups (migrants) can repurpose social media algorithms and features to reclaim agency and redefine identities globally.

The core scientific truth this research offers is that taste ethnography reveals engagement with cultural values and shared identity, indicating the emergence of a digital third space for intercultural exchange. Future research is suggested to investigate the long-term psychological impact of this “performative hybridity” on influencers themselves, or to expand the scope to other platforms, such as YouTube, to examine whether the depth of identity negotiation varies with content duration.

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