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DIGITAL REPRESENTATIONS OF DELI MALAY CULTURE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY NEGOTIATION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE IN MEDAN

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana media sosial merepresentasikan budaya Melayu Deli dan berkontribusi terhadap negosiasi identitas budaya di kalangan generasi muda Kota Medan, Indonesia. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan lima informan di sekitar Taman Istana Maimun dan analisis konten visual terhadap enam tangkapan layar media sosial. Informan terdiri atas tiga pengguna media sosial dari kalangan muda, seorang pegiat komunitas budaya, dan seorang kreator konten budaya lokal. Data wawancara dianalisis secara tematik. Representasi yang paling banyak diingat mencakup Istana Maimun, busana tradisional, tari, kuliner, dan kegiatan kebudayaan, sedangkan bahasa Melayu dan pantun relatif kurang menonjol. Keterlibatan digital mencakup aktivitas menonton, menyukai, menyimpan, membagikan, memverifikasi informasi, hingga menghadiri kegiatan budaya. Hubungan antara paparan digital dan identitas budaya berbeda antarinforman: sebagian mengungkapkan kedekatan budaya yang lebih kuat, sedangkan informan berlatar keluarga non-Melayu memahami warisan Melayu Deli sebagai bagian dari sejarah bersama Kota Medan dan bukan identitas etnis pribadinya. Media sosial berfungsi sebagai pintu masuk pembelajaran budaya, tetapi tidak dengan sendirinya menjamin partisipasi bermakna atau pelestarian. Penjelasan kontekstual, verifikasi sumber, kolaborasi dengan komunitas budaya, dan keterhubungan dengan pengalaman langsung diperlukan untuk mendukung komunikasi warisan budaya digital yang bertanggung jawab.

Keywords:
Cultural Identity;
Cultural Representation
Deli Malay;
Social Media;
Young People

ABSTRACT

This study examines how social media represent Deli Malay culture and contribute to the negotiation of cultural identity among young people in Medan, Indonesia. Adopting an exploratory descriptive qualitative approach, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with five purposively selected informants and visual content analysis of six social media screenshots. Participants comprised three young social media users, a cultural community activist, and a local cultural content creator. Interview data were analysed thematically to identify patterns of cultural representation, digital engagement, and identity negotiation. Findings indicate that Istana Maimun, traditional attire, dance, cuisine, and cultural events constitute the most frequently recalled representations, whereas Malay language and pantun receive comparatively limited attention in participants' accounts. Digital engagement ranges from passive viewing to information verification and participation in cultural activities. Cultural identity emerges as a negotiated process shaped by digital exposure, family background, and social experiences rather than as an automatic consequence of social media use. Given the limited empirical corpus, these findings provide contextual insights rather than statistically generalisable conclusions. The study highlights the importance of contextual explanations, credible cultural sources, community collaboration, and connections between digital representation and direct cultural experiences in supporting responsible cultural heritage communication.

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1. Introduction

Social media has become a significant environment in which young people access information, interact with others, and communicate their social and cultural experiences. Digital platforms not only circulate messages but also facilitate representation through short-form videos, photographs, captions, comments, and user-generated content. Within digital media environments, young people's identities emerge through interactions among everyday experience, social relationships, content selection, and audience feedback (Tsaliki, 2022; Pérez-Torres, 2024). Social media should therefore be understood as a site of cultural communication and meaning-making rather than merely as a promotional channel.

The expanding accessibility of digital communication in Indonesia provides an important empirical context for understanding the circulation of local cultural heritage among younger generations. According to the Indonesian Internet Service Providers Association (APJII, 2024), internet penetration reached 79.5%, representing approximately 221.56 million users nationwide. Generation Z accounted for 34.40% of internet users, indicating the substantial presence of younger generations within Indonesia's digital environment. These developments have broadened the potential channels through which cultural information, historical narratives, and community traditions may circulate beyond geographically bounded settings. The significance of digital connectivity for cultural communication nevertheless extends beyond technological accessibility, as increased exposure does not necessarily correspond to historical understanding, cultural identification, or meaningful participation. Digital environments consequently require closer examination as spaces in which younger audiences encounter, interpret, and negotiate representations of local cultural heritage.

In Indonesia's multiethnic context, social media creates opportunities for local cultures to become visible across communities while simultaneously introducing risks of simplification, stereotyping, and the detachment of cultural symbols from their social contexts. Research on social media, culture, and identity suggests that digital environments can facilitate expressions of belonging, identity exploration, and engagement with other cultures (Ahmed et al., 2022; Radwan, 2022; Condemayta Soto et al., 2023). Content visibility, nevertheless, should not be equated with cultural understanding. Platform mechanisms and the preference for immediately attention-grabbing material can shape which representations achieve prominence (Duffy & Meisner, 2022).

Deli Malay culture constitutes an important component of Medan's history and cultural landscape. Its heritage is expressed through historical buildings, performing arts, traditional attire, cuisine, language, and community social practices. Research on Deli Malay coastal communities in Medan emphasizes the significance of social interaction in community life and the maintenance of local cultural values (Izharsyah et al., 2023). Accordingly, discussions of social media must remain connected to social relationships and community knowledge rather than focusing exclusively on the appeal of displayed

symbols. The online presentation of culture does not necessarily produce comprehensive understanding: visually engaging content may increase cultural reach, yet condensed formats require accompanying explanations of the history, functions, and meanings of traditions. A study of the preservation of Joged Mataram through YouTube demonstrates the relevance of digital documentation and dissemination of local culture (Suprihono, 2022), while research on user-generated content highlights the importance of perceived authenticity and information quality in engagement with intangible cultural heritage preservation (Hua et al., 2024).

Empirical research conducted in Medan provides further evidence of the relationship between digital communication and the contemporary development of Malay cultural heritage. Adhani (2023), through descriptive qualitative research involving literature analysis and interviews with young people in Medan, identified growing awareness of local cultural traditions and the utilisation of digital platforms to produce and disseminate Malay cultural content. The findings demonstrate that younger generations can participate in cultural communication through digital content creation rather than functioning exclusively as audiences. The preservation of cultural identity also remains embedded in community relationships and everyday social practices. Izharsyah et al. (2023), examining patterns of social interaction within Deli Malay coastal communities, identified culturally embedded forms of interaction and emphasised the importance of strengthening local cultural values through education and community engagement. Considered together, these studies establish the relevance of examining digital cultural representation alongside the social relationships through which Malay cultural meanings are maintained, interpreted, and communicated.

The digital communication of Deli Malay heritage is also reflected in emerging initiatives to improve public access to historical and cultural information associated with Istana Maimun. Mardiah et al. (2025) examined the implementation of a QR-code-based historical information system designed to introduce visitors to the architectural heritage, historical significance, and cultural values of the Deli Sultanate. Their study reported that digitally accessible historical explanations could support visitors' interest in and understanding of local cultural heritage, illustrating the potential contribution of digital technologies to contextual cultural learning. This initiative concerns site-based digital interpretation rather than social media reception, making its relevance complementary to research on platform-mediated cultural representation. The distinction is particularly important because the digital visibility of historical sites, traditional attire, artistic performances, and culinary practices cannot independently establish how younger audiences understand their cultural meanings. Investigating these interpretations requires attention to the relationship between cultural symbols, contextual information, personal experiences, and the social processes through which cultural identity is negotiated.

The research problem addressed in this study concerns how young people in Medan interpret Deli Malay representations encountered on social media, how these interpretations relate to cultural identity, and what limitations social media presents as a means of cultural preservation. Research on the aesthetic expression of young Indonesian

users underscores the significance of choices about digital self-representation (Triantoro & Pramana, 2024), while scholarship on adolescent identity conceptualizes social media as a context-dependent arena of interaction and identity development (Pérez-Torres, 2024). This exploratory study focuses specifically on Deli Malay culture by bringing together perspectives from young users, cultural community activists, and content creators.

A broader transnational Malay perspective is necessary to avoid treating Deli Malay culture as detached from linguistic and identity encounters elsewhere in the region. In this article, the term global Malay serves as an analytical designation for connections among cultural practices and representations across national boundaries, particularly those involving Medan, Brunei Darussalam, and Malaysia; it does not imply that all Malay communities share uniform histories or identities. Research on language contact in social media discourse in Brunei and Malaysia demonstrates the concurrent use of local and global linguistic resources in digital communication (McLellan, 2022). Brunei provides a relevant point of conceptual comparison because its scholarship examines the intersections of Malay identity, Islam, national identity, and young people's everyday practices. Sharbawi and Mabud (2021) describe Melayu Islam Beraja as a framework of national identity, whereas Mohamad (2023a) explores digital social engagement, self-expression, and religious expression among Bruneian youth. These contextual differences inform the interpretation of Medan, where the present findings indicate cross-ethnic cultural appreciation without conflating respect for a culture with ethnic membership.

The study aims to (1) identify the forms of Deli Malay cultural representation most readily recalled by young people; (2) explain patterns of digital engagement and the interpretations of identity that emerge; and (3) examine the opportunities, risks, and strategies associated with cultural preservation through collaboration between social media actors and cultural communities. Its contribution lies in understanding identity not as an automatic consequence of platform use but as a negotiated process shaped by experience, family background, access to information, and face-to-face interaction.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach drawing on two types of material: semi-structured interviews with five informants in Medan and six social media screenshots supplied by the author. Interviews were used to examine participants' experiences and interpretations, whereas visual content analysis described observable elements and interpreted how culture was presented in the image corpus. The two sources were examined in parallel rather than treated as evidence of causal relationships. Attention to context, user practices, and the evidentiary limits of digital material followed established principles of digital research (Forberg & Schilt, 2023; Cocq & Liliequist, 2024; Stepnik, 2024).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews in the vicinity of Taman Istana Maimun, Medan, North Sumatra. The interview guide comprised 11 principal questions for young informants and adapted questions for supporting informants. Participants were purposively selected according to their relevance to the research focus:

experience using social media, involvement in Deli Malay cultural communities, or production of local cultural content. Informant profiles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profiles of research informants

Informant	Category/role	Profile
Rizky Pratama	Primary informant	Male university student, aged 20; Instagram and TikTok user
Siti Aulia Rahma	Primary informant	Female university student, aged 22; actively shares cultural content
Kevin Wijaya	Primary informant	Young professional, aged 24; from a non-Malay family
Muhammad Fadli	Supporting informant	Deli Malay cultural community activist
Andika Syahputra	Supporting informant	Local cultural content creator

The interview data were analyzed thematically through repeated reading of the transcripts, identification of relevant statements, grouping of codes, and development of themes. Initial themes encompassed recalled content types, forms of digital engagement, sources of knowledge and verification, interpretations of identity, representational risks, and preservation strategies. Interpretations were compared across informants to identify similarities and differences, particularly among young users, a community activist, and a content creator. This procedure is consistent with qualitative approaches that situate digital practices within social contexts and participants' lived experiences (Cocq & Liliequist, 2024; Stepnik, 2024). To maintain analytical traceability, quotations in the findings were drawn from the available transcripts and are not intended to statistically represent all young people in Medan. Given the exploratory design and five-person sample, the findings remain contextual rather than generalizable.

Purposive sampling was applied to select five informants based on their experience with social media, involvement in Deli Malay cultural activities, or engagement in local cultural content production. Participants comprised three young social media users aged 20–24 years, one cultural community activist, and one cultural content creator, providing diverse perspectives on cultural representation and identity negotiation. Semi-structured interviews employed 11 principal questions addressing digital engagement, cultural knowledge, identity interpretation, and preservation practices, with adaptations for supporting informants. Six author-supplied screenshots were selected based on their availability and relevance to cultural representations involving cuisine, traditional attire, performances, historical sites, and community identities. Data credibility was supported through systematic thematic comparisons across informants, examination of correspondences between interview findings and visual materials, and explicit differentiation between observable evidence and analytical interpretation. These procedures strengthened analytical transparency while acknowledging the contextual limitations of the small empirical corpus.

The discussion of global Malay connections was developed through a literature review providing an interpretive context, particularly in relation to Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia. All empirical evidence in this study nevertheless comes from the five informants

in Medan; no interviews, observations, or social media sampling were undertaken in Brunei or Malaysia. Consequently, the comparison is not used to infer equivalent experiences across populations or cross-national causal relationships.

The visual corpus comprised six screenshots provided by the author: the Kuliner Deli Instagram account (Figure 2), the Kuliner Deli TikTok interface (Figure 3), Citra Budaya Melayu (Figure 4), the Istana Maimun Instagram account (Figure 5), search results related to MABMI (Figure 6), and Malay Creative Project (Figure 7). Selection was based on the availability of author-supplied material rather than random sampling or representative coverage of account posts. No direct account browsing, comment collection, post archive examination, or account authenticity verification was undertaken.

The unit of analysis was each complete screenshot. Recorded elements included legible account names or search terms, subjects visible in thumbnails, legible titles and text, profile arrangement, and organizational markers. Descriptive coding assessed each image using six categories: display identity, cultural elements, visual presentation, available narrative context, organizational or community markers, and evidentiary limitations. Observable features were distinguished from interpretations of their meaning. Representation was understood as the selection and arrangement of signs rather than a comprehensive reflection of culture (Hall, 1997).

Cross-image comparisons identified similarities and differences in presentation, which were subsequently examined alongside the interview themes. Thematic correspondence did not imply that informants had encountered the same posts. A screenshot was not treated as equivalent to an individual post because it could contain multiple thumbnails, and MABMI search results were distinguished from account profile pages. The analysis did not quantify content proportions, test intercoder reliability, or obtain validation from account administrators. Dates of screenshot capture were unavailable, so the images were not used to infer changes over time or the current status of the accounts. Follower, view, and like counts were not treated as engagement measures, particularly where text was insufficiently legible. The absence of an element from a screenshot does not establish its absence from the account or the cultural tradition concerned.

3. Result and Discussion

Theoretical Framework and Analytical Concepts

Digital transformation is reshaping the production, distribution, and consumption of cultural information. Photographs, short videos, and digital narratives bring cultural objects into users' everyday lives beyond their original locations, meaning that cultural transmission no longer occurs exclusively through families, communities, and face-to-face encounters. Research on youth digital participation in cultural heritage management identifies access, modes of engagement, and the meaningfulness of participation as interconnected issues requiring assessment (Zhang et al., 2024). Social media is not a neutral environment: platform features, governance rules, and recommendation systems influence content visibility and creators' strategies. Duffy and Meisner (2022) demonstrate that creators experience uncertainty over the ways algorithms make content more or less

visible. In the Deli Malay context, these dynamics help explain why visually immediate material, including buildings, traditional attire, dance, and food, may become more prominent than explanations of language, pantun, or social values that require extended narration.

Digital communication broadens the possible roles of audiences. Users may view, save, share, comment on, or produce posts, although these forms of interaction should not automatically be equated with in-depth understanding or cultural participation. Zhang et al. (2024) emphasize the need for meaningful, inclusive, and assessable participation rather than an exclusive reliance on reach or interaction metrics. User-generated content can facilitate the circulation of cultural experiences, but its credibility requires consideration of sources, context, and informational authenticity. Hua et al. (2024) highlight the relevance of perceptions of user-generated content and authenticity to intentions to preserve intangible cultural heritage. This study therefore distinguishes preliminary digital interactions, such as viewing and liking, from more reflective engagement involving source verification, questioning, discussion, further information seeking, and participation in cultural activities.

Cultural representation concerns the processes through which a community and its cultural practices are selected, displayed, named, and explained in media. Representations cannot encompass the full complexity of a culture; certain elements are foregrounded while others remain less visible. From Hall's (1997) perspective, media are not passive mirrors that simply transfer culture onto screens but sites where meaning is selected, organized, and circulated through signs, images, language, and narratives. Videos depicting Istana Maimun, traditional attire, dance, or cuisine do more than display cultural objects: they frame how audiences understand them. Camera angles, titles, captions, terminology, and omitted information may position cultural elements as historically significant, exotic, modern, or merely entertaining.

Cultural identity is conceptualized as a process of meaning-making that may encompass belonging, pride, knowledge, emotional proximity, and appreciation of local heritage. Hall (1990) describes cultural identity not simply as a fixed inheritance but as a process of becoming shaped by history, representation, and social positioning. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory identifies group membership as one source of self-understanding, without implying that appreciation of a culture automatically constitutes ethnic membership. Castells (2010) conceptualizes identity as a construction of meaning situated within social relations and networked society. Personal ethnic identification must therefore be distinguished from appreciation of local culture, as suggested by scholarship on layered performances of cultural identity on social media (Condemayta Soto et al., 2023) and research on adolescent digital identity emphasizing interaction, self-presentation, and audience responses (Pérez-Torres, 2024). The distinction is particularly important in a multiethnic city such as Medan: individuals may value Deli Malay culture as part of the city's history without identifying as ethnically Malay, while digital encounters can connect different identities without eliminating disparities of experience and social positioning (Saud et al., 2025).

The concept of participatory culture helps explain how social media users can move beyond receiving messages to saving, sharing, commenting on, and creating content or participating in cultural activities. Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, and Robison (2009) emphasize the importance of opportunities for participation, collaboration, and social support in media culture. Engagement is consequently examined along a spectrum comprising exposure (viewing), low-intensity responses (liking), circulation (saving or sharing), reflective engagement (asking questions, discussing, or verifying sources), and offline participation (attending activities). The spectrum is not treated as a universal sequence through which all users must pass, nor are interaction counts regarded as sufficient evidence of deep cultural understanding.

Studies of user-generated content and digital participation highlight authenticity, information quality, and audience involvement as important considerations in cultural heritage preservation (Hua et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Duffy and Meisner (2022) show that creator visibility is affected by platform dynamics, meaning that popularity cannot serve as an indicator of the completeness of cultural information. This study thus treats source verification, involvement of cultural practitioners, contextual explanation, and connections between online and offline activity as analytical principles of responsible preservation. Its conceptual framework comprises three interrelated layers—digital transformation, changes in communication, and cultural implications—and serves as a guide for interpretation rather than a quantitative causal model (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study

Source: Developed by the authors based on the theoretical framework adopted.

These concepts were translated into the analytical dimensions presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Operationalization of theoretical concepts in the interview analysis

Theoretical concept	Core proposition	Interview indicators	Interpretive focus
Cultural representation (Hall, 1997)	Media construct meanings through the selection of symbols and narratives	Recalled content types; captions, sources, and contextual explanations	Cultural elements foregrounded or simplified
Cultural identity (Hall, 1990)	Identity as a dynamic, context-dependent process	Pride or affinity; recognition as a personal identity	Distinguishing personal identification from appreciation of urban heritage
Social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)	Group membership as a source of self-understanding	How informants relate themselves to family, ethnicity, and the city	Boundaries of identity expressed by informants
Participatory culture (Jenkins et al., 2009)	Audiences can become participants and content producers	Viewing, liking, saving, sharing, and attending events	Depth of participation and links between online and offline activities

Theoretical concept	Core proposition	Interview indicators	Interpretive focus
Digital cultural heritage (Hua et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024)	Visibility requires accuracy and community involvement	Source verification; consultation with practitioners; suggestions for creators	Engaging yet responsible content strategies

Deli Malay Cultural Representation: The Prominence of Visual Content and Historical Sites

The interviews indicate that the Deli Malay content most readily recalled by informants was predominantly visual, including Istana Maimun, traditional attire, welcoming dances, cuisine, music, and documentation of cultural events. Rizky recalled encountering:

> "Videos about Istana Maimun, traditional Malay clothing, welcoming dances, and food often associated with Medan." (Rizky Pratama, interview)

Kevin similarly remembered content about Istana Maimun that included brief explanations of the building's history. Siti particularly recalled videos featuring Malay dance and traditional attire posted during cultural events. These accounts suggest that easily recognizable cultural representations tend to rely on visually prominent objects and activities. According to Rizky and Siti, Malay language and pantun appeared less frequently in their experiences than food, tourist attractions, clothing, and performances. This finding does not suggest that language or pantun is unimportant to Deli Malay culture; rather, it reveals a distinction between the breadth of cultural practices and the elements most visible within the informants' digital experiences. The pattern is consistent with discussions of visual culture and identity performance on social media, where identity is frequently articulated through forms that audiences can readily see, share, and recognize (Condemayta Soto et al., 2023; Triantoro & Pramana, 2024).

The interview findings are further supported by specific accounts of cultural encounters and visual representations in the digital materials. Rizky Pratama recalled encountering "videos about Istana Maimun, traditional Malay clothing, welcoming dances, and food often associated with Medan," indicating the prominence of recognisable cultural symbols in his social media experience. Siti Aulia Rahma similarly emphasised traditional performances and clothing, while her participation in a cultural event demonstrated engagement beyond digital observation. The visual materials reinforced these themes: Figures 2 and 3 displayed culinary content, Figure 4 highlighted traditional attire and performances, and Figure 5 presented Istana Maimun as a historical landmark. These correspondences illustrate how cultural heritage becomes visible through digital platforms, although they do not establish that informants viewed the specific accounts examined.

Within the Medan context, Istana Maimun functioned in informants' accounts not only as a tourist attraction but also as an introduction to Deli Malay history. This interpretation should be situated alongside community life, as illustrated by research on social interaction among Deli Malay coastal communities in Medan (Izharsyah et al., 2023). Treating buildings or clothing solely as visual objects, however, may obscure the associated

histories, values, and social practices. From a representational perspective, choices about which symbols and information to display contribute to the meanings audiences construct (Hall, 1997).

The following four screenshots form part of the visual content analysis corpus. Figures 2 and 3 provide material on the presentation of cuisine, Figure 4 concerns attire and performances, and Figure 5 concerns the visualization of a historical site. Each unit and the cross-image synthesis are discussed in the section "Visual Content Analysis of Six Social Media Screenshots." Illegible material was not used as evidence.

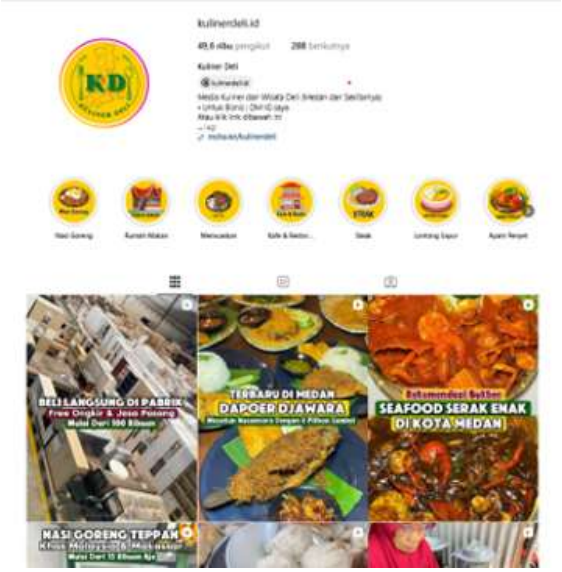


Figure 2. Screenshot documentation of the Kuliner Deli Instagram account.

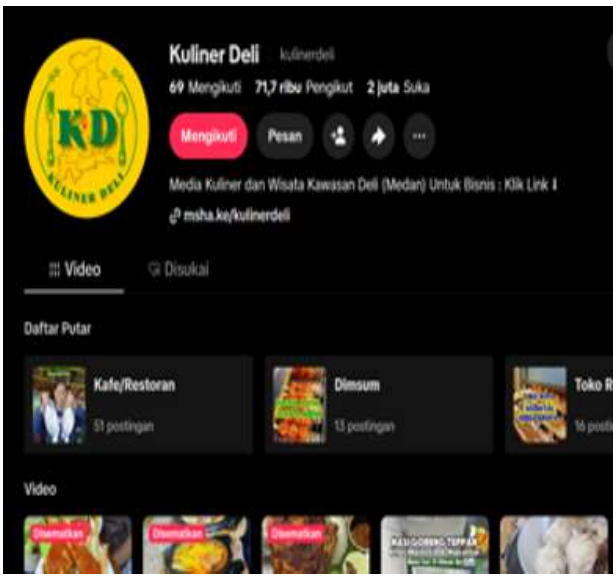


Figure 3. Screenshot documentation of the Kuliner Deli TikTok account.



Figure 4. Screenshot documentation of the Citra Budaya Melayu social media account.

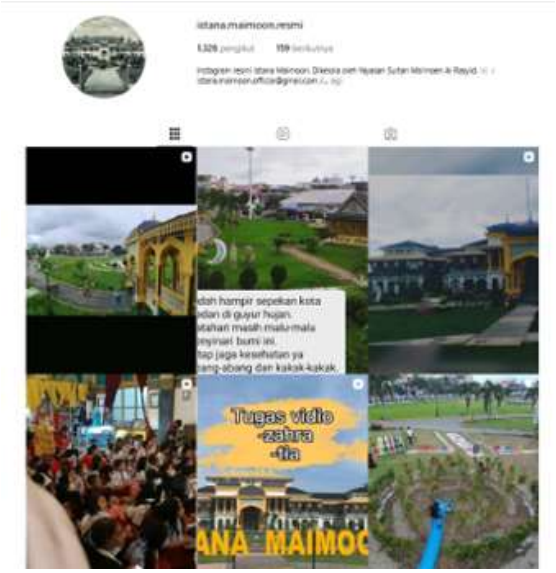


Figure 5. Screenshot documentation of the Istana Maimun Instagram account.

Gradations of Digital Engagement: From Viewing to Direct Experience

Informants exhibited distinct patterns of engagement. Rizky typically viewed, liked, and saved historical content before seeking additional information about Istana Maimun and sharing videos with friends. Siti saved and shared content, asked about unfamiliar terms, had posted simple documentation of university activities, and attended a cultural event with friends after learning about it on social media. Kevin was more likely to view and like content, occasionally share it, and consult other sources when seeking to confirm information. These differences indicate varying degrees of participation rather than a single, uniform pattern of engagement.

Meaningful digital engagement becomes apparent when users move beyond immediate reactions to verify sources, participate in discussions, ask questions, or attend

cultural events. Siti explained that firsthand experience helped her recognize that cultural events:

> "Are not just about clothing or performances; they also involve people and preparation." (Siti Aulia Rahma, interview)

This observation is consistent with research on digital participation in cultural heritage management, which emphasizes creating opportunities for young people to participate substantively rather than merely receive information (Zhang et al., 2024). Social media can connect digital practices with offline experiences, although this transition is not guaranteed for every user. Andika, the content creator, noted that online responses may broaden content reach without necessarily demonstrating that audiences understand its meaning. Likes, comments, and views should therefore not be treated as the sole indicators of successful cultural preservation. Content directing audiences to credible sources, event schedules, workshops, or cultural communities may facilitate more meaningful engagement (Suprihono, 2022; Hua et al., 2024).

Digital engagement with Deli Malay cultural content also reveals how cultural awareness, belonging, and identity negotiation develop through different individual experiences. Rizky's engagement with historical content encouraged further exploration of Istana Maimun and strengthened his familiarity with Medan's cultural heritage, while Siti's transition from online exposure to attending cultural events reinforced her understanding of cultural practices as collective social experiences. Kevin's interpretation demonstrated a different form of cultural awareness, as he appreciated Deli Malay heritage as part of Medan's shared history without identifying himself ethnically as Malay. These differences suggest that digital exposure may stimulate cultural curiosity and emotional attachment, but its contribution to identity negotiation depends on personal background, social interactions, and opportunities for direct cultural participation. Cultural belonging should therefore be understood as a context-dependent process rather than an automatic outcome of social media engagement.

Social Media as an Entry Point to Knowledge, Rather Than Its Sole Source

Informants regarded social media as an initial means of encountering cultural elements but not necessarily as a sufficient resource for understanding their meanings. Rizky explained that short videos provide introductory information and prompt him to consult official websites or other explanations. Siti verified the significance of clothing and cultural events by asking family members and consulting community accounts. Kevin compared multiple sources rather than automatically assuming that every statement in a video was accurate.

Such information-checking practices matter because cultural content may originate from tourism accounts, general-interest creators, community organizations, or individual users with differing experiences. Muhammad Fadli, a cultural community activist, emphasized that the names and functions of cultural elements should not be inferred solely from their appearance and that cultural practices may vary. His observations underscore the importance of collaboration between content creators and cultural practitioners or historical sources. Scholarship on culture and identity on social media likewise

conceptualizes platforms as spaces of meaning-making that must be interpreted in their social contexts (Radwan, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2022).

These findings position digital literacy as an integral component of cultural preservation. In this context, digital literacy involves more than technical proficiency with platforms; it includes the ability to establish the provenance of information, distinguish historical accounts from creators' opinions, recognize context, and assess whether a post oversimplifies a cultural practice. Digital ethnography scholarship similarly emphasizes the need for researchers and users to consider context, relationships, and ethics when interpreting platform-mediated practices (Forberg & Schilt, 2023; Cocq & Liliequist, 2024; Stepnik, 2024).

Cultural Identity as a Negotiated Process

A central finding of the study is that the relationship between digital content and cultural identity is not uniform. Siti understood Deli Malay culture as an important part of her identity and social environment, while recognizing that identity is also shaped by family, education, interpersonal relationships, and experiences of living in Medan. Rizky associated Deli Malay culture with his surroundings and the city's history but did not necessarily regard it as his primary personal identity. Kevin, who comes from a non-Malay family, explicitly stated that Deli Malay culture was not his personal ethnic identity, although he recognized it as an important component of Medan's history and social environment.

These differences demonstrate that cultural identity can involve multiple forms of attachment: personal identification, emotional affinity, knowledge, local pride, and appreciation of shared heritage. Appreciation of Deli Malay culture therefore should not be conflated with a claim to Malay ethnic membership. Muhammad Fadli also emphasized that interpretations of identity should respect individuals' own experiences and self-identifications. The findings resonate with scholarship on cultural identity performance on social media, which characterizes young people's identities as layered and negotiated through social contexts and representational choices (Condemayta Soto et al., 2023; Tsaliki, 2022).

Social media may strengthen cultural affinity and curiosity, but the identity processes described by informants cannot be separated from family, education, friendship networks, firsthand experience, and Medan's multiethnic environment. Research on adolescent identity treats digital platforms as spaces of self-reflection and self-expression shaped by interaction and user experience (Pérez-Torres, 2024). Studies of aesthetic expression among young Indonesian users likewise demonstrate the significance of visual choices in self-presentation (Triantoro & Pramana, 2024). Social media is thus more appropriately understood in this case as one setting in which identity is negotiated rather than as an independent cause of identity change.

Benefits and Risks: Achieving Visibility without Losing Context

Informants identified several benefits of social media: cultural information becomes easier to locate, documentation can reach wider audiences, young people can participate

in content creation, and individuals from different ethnic backgrounds can learn about local history. They also highlighted risks, including the rapid spread of inaccurate information, the presentation of cultural symbols without explanation, the removal of context to fit digital trends, the use of culture as decoration, and assumptions that a single symbol represents the entirety of Malay culture.

Content creators must respond to short-form formats and competition for audience attention. Andika suggested that when adequate context cannot be provided in a single video, the explanation can be extended through the caption or subsequent videos. Serial content allows creators to retain engaging formats without abandoning substantive information. Research on algorithmic visibility also indicates that content popularity is not entirely within creators' control (Duffy & Meisner, 2022). Cultural communication strategies consequently need to address not only audience appeal but also source credibility, narrative continuity, and representational responsibility.

Comparison with existing studies suggests that social media offers both opportunities and challenges for cultural identity and preservation. Research on multicultural integration in Indonesia provides a framework for understanding encounters among different identities in digital environments (Saud et al., 2025). Documentation and dissemination of local culture through YouTube further suggest that increased access can support the continuity of cultural knowledge rather than merely generate temporary attention (Suprihono, 2022). In the present study, the risk of oversimplification is derived from informants' assessments rather than assumed to affect all users in the same way.

Preservation Strategies: Collaboration among Creators, Communities, and Educational Institutions

Informants' recommendations pointed to four strategies. Content creators should cite sources, verify terminology and historical information, and distinguish personal experience from historical fact. Cultural communities could act as content reviewers, provide knowledgeable contributors, and clarify variations in cultural practice. Schools and universities could connect digital assignments or projects to discussions, site visits, workshops, and collaborative documentation with communities. Digital content should also provide pathways to further information through captions, video series, digital archives, or publicly accessible event schedules.

These strategies position young people as active participants in cultural transmission rather than passive consumers of content. Zhang et al. (2024) underscore the importance of frameworks for evaluating young people's digital participation in heritage management, while Hua et al. (2024) associate perceptions of content and authenticity with intentions to preserve cultural heritage. For Deli Malay culture, partnerships between creators and communities may connect digital creativity with practitioners' knowledge and help prevent cultural promotion from displacing cultural learning.

Conceptually, this exploratory study suggests that cultural identity formation on social media may involve several non-linear processes: exposure to content can attract attention; attention may prompt information seeking; information seeking may generate understanding or appreciation; and, under certain conditions, these developments may

lead to direct cultural engagement. The effectiveness of preservation efforts should therefore be evaluated not solely through cultural visibility but also through information quality, community recognition, and the availability of opportunities for audiences to learn more.

Figures 6 and 7 constitute visual units relevant to organizational presentation and cultural communication. Figure 6 is treated as search results associated with MABMI, not as an official organizational profile, whereas Figure 7 displays the Malay Creative Project profile and its thumbnails. The discussion does not assume any connection between those responsible for these displays and the interview informants; the images are examined in the visual content analysis section.



Figure 6. Screenshot documentation of social media search results associated with MABMI.



Figure 7. Screenshot documentation of the Malay Creative Project account

Visual Content Analysis of Six Social Media Screenshots

The analysis distinguishes directly observable evidence from interpreted meaning. Although the six screenshots depict different forms of presentation, not all can automatically be classified as documentation of Deli Malay traditions. The name Kuliner Deli, in particular, is a visible account identifier rather than evidence that every dish shown originates in Deli Malay culinary traditions. Likewise, the appearance of MABMI in search results does not establish that all displayed videos are official organizational productions. Table 3 summarizes the assessment of each visual unit.

Table 3. Visual content analysis matrix for social media documentation

Visual unit	Observable evidence	Presentation category	Interpretation and limitations
V1 / Figure 2	Kuliner Deli Instagram profile; logo, highlights, and food image grid	Cuisine presented through images and prominent promotional titles	Deli as a naming marker; ethnic origins and traditional meanings of foods cannot be established
V2 / Figure 3	Kuliner Deli TikTok interface; video tabs, playlists, and food thumbnails	Playlists and thumbnails offer paths for exploring content	Demonstrates content organization, not evidence of audience understanding
V3 / Figure 4	Citra Budaya Melayu profile; group photograph in performance attire and event setting	Costumed performers, group arrangement, and stage are foregrounded	Culture as public performance; dance type and event context are not fully legible
V4 / Figure 5	Istana Maimun Instagram profile; building, grounds, and visitor documentation	Buildings and visiting spaces recur as visual subjects	Site as a historical marker; completeness of historical explanation cannot be assessed
V5 / Figure 6	MABMI search results; thumbnails featuring buildings, people, activities, and organizational text	Diverse results appear on one screen, rather than a single verified profile	Diverse visual associations; authorship of individual results remains unverified
V6 / Figure 7	Malay Creative Project profile; highlights, organizational structure poster, and performance documentation	Group identity combined with organizational information and artistic activities	Organizational and performance markers; preservation outcomes remain unknown

Cuisine as an Entry Point for Audience Attention

Food constitutes the principal subject of Figures 2 and 3, while the Kuliner Deli name and logo provide continuity across the account displays. Instagram presents the material through an image grid and highlights, whereas the TikTok interface features playlists and video thumbnails. This comparison reveals differences in how culinary content is

organized, not differences in the effectiveness of the two platforms. Without examining complete posts or obtaining explanations from cultural practitioners, the food depicted cannot be conclusively identified as Deli Malay culinary heritage.

Traditional Attire and Performance as Public Representation

Figure 4 foregrounds a group photograph featuring performance attire and an event setting. Figure 7 similarly combines performance documentation with an account profile and an organizational structure poster. Both displays can be interpreted as representations that emphasize collective performance and group identity. The photographs alone, however, are insufficient to establish the names of dances, rules governing attire, or the symbolic meanings of individual accessories. A representational perspective enables an interpretation of these visual selections without equating them with the entirety of cultural practice (Hall, 1997).

Istana Maimun as a Spatial Marker of Heritage

In Figure 5, buildings, grounds, and visitor activities are visible within the account's image grid. This presentation positions the site as a possible entry point for place-based cultural recognition. Figure 6 also contains an Istana Maimun thumbnail, but it appears within search results; its presence therefore does not demonstrate an official affiliation with MABMI. The analysis establishes only that the building appears in two visual units with different display contexts. The completeness of historical information and the accuracy of post narratives could not be evaluated.

Organizational Markers and the Limits of Attribution

The organizational structure poster in Figure 7 provides visual evidence that the Malay Creative Project profile presents a group structure. Figure 6, by contrast, displays search results from multiple sources that cannot be treated as a unified institutional statement. These display types represent distinct levels of attribution: a search term, a profile name, and the authorship of individual posts are not interchangeable. Neither image establishes the existence of a particular preservation program, interorganizational collaboration, or successful generational renewal among cultural practitioners.

Connections with the Interview Findings

The depictions of food, attire, performances, and Istana Maimun in the visual corpus correspond thematically to elements recalled by informants in the section on Deli Malay cultural representation. This correspondence enriches the description of representational forms present in the research material but does not verify that individual informants viewed these particular accounts. Language, pantun, and extended historical explanations are not prominent in the legible portions of the images; this observation is confined to the six screenshots rather than all posts published by the accounts. Scholarship on participatory culture similarly cautions against equating the appearance of content with participation that has actually occurred (Jenkins et al., 2009).

Analytical Implications

The corpus illustrates the importance of distinguishing the visibility of symbols, the availability of context, and audience reception. A cultural element may appear on a screen without sufficient explanation to establish its origin, function, or meaning. Recommendations for citing sources, explaining terminology, and involving cultural communities, discussed in the preservation strategies section, are therefore appropriate as proposals for improved practice rather than evidence that all accounts in the sample already follow these practices. Assessing relationships among information quality, authenticity, and preservation requires more comprehensive evidence than account profile screenshots alone (Hua et al., 2024).

Deli Malay Culture in the Global Malay Conversation: A Conceptual Comparison

This discussion conceptually places the local findings in dialogue with scholarship on Brunei and Malaysia. In Medan, the data distinguish Siti's personal identification, Rizky's historical affinity, and Kevin's appreciation without a claim to Malay ethnicity. In Brunei, scholarship situates Malay identity within the national framework of Melayu Islam Beraja, while studies of everyday practices continue to document negotiation of language and self-expression (Sharbawi & Mabud, 2021; Abidin & Sharbawi, 2023). Shared use of the term Malay therefore does not eliminate differences in the social positioning of identity.

With respect to language, the limited references to Malay language and pantun in the Medan interviews suggest their relatively low visibility within informants' reported experiences. This differs from McLellan's (2022) research, which directly examined texts and language choices in social media communication in Brunei and Malaysia. The contrast cannot support a claim that Bruneian youth preserve language more effectively than young people in Medan because the data types and research designs are not equivalent. It does, however, indicate the value of investigating language practices in future studies.

Regarding participation, Siti's attendance at a cultural event after encountering information online illustrates one possible pathway between digital engagement and offline experience. Research on Brunei discusses more varied forms of engagement, including self-expression, social involvement, and the formation of religious discourse (Mohamad, 2023a, 2023b). Both contexts suggest that users are more than passive message recipients, but this conceptual similarity does not establish equivalent levels or outcomes of participation. Participatory culture is employed to understand possibilities for involvement, not to rank communities according to presumed degrees of cultural development (Jenkins et al., 2009).

The comparison further clarifies distinctions among cultural pride, ethnic identity, national identity, and religious expression. Although these dimensions may intersect, they are not interchangeable. Kevin's appreciation of Medan's history cannot be construed as a change in ethnicity, just as the religious expressions of young people documented in Bruneian studies cannot serve as the sole measure of their identities (Mohamad, 2023b). Hall's (1990) framework and Tajfel and Turner's (1979) work are employed to respect individuals' expressed identifications while attending to their broader group contexts.

Implications for Transnational Malay Heritage Preservation and Future Research

Deli Malay content intended for cross-border audiences should clearly identify its cultural and geographical provenance. Building on informants' concerns about verification, posts could specify the cultural element, location, explanatory sources, and relevant variations in practice. Precise descriptions would help audiences distinguish a local practice from representations of the wider Malay world. This proposal is consistent with the emphasis placed on information quality and authenticity in digital cultural heritage preservation research (Hua et al., 2024).

Content focusing on the Malay language and pantun could complement the prominence of buildings, attire, dance, and cuisine in informants' experiences. Suggested formats include explanations of local terms, brief conversations, and pantun recitations accompanied by practitioners' interpretations. Translation may broaden accessibility while retaining the original language. Studies by McLellan (2022) and Abidin and Sharbawi (2023) provide a rationale for attending to linguistic repertoires, although the effectiveness of these proposed formats remains to be tested.

Collaboration between Deli Malay communities and cultural partners in Brunei or Malaysia could constitute a future initiative rather than an activity claimed to have already occurred. Potential arrangements include online discussions about terminological variation, collaborative documentation, and exchanges of experiences in cultural content management. Young people should have opportunities to ask questions and help determine topics rather than participate solely as viewers. This orientation accords with the need to evaluate the meaningfulness of youth digital participation in cultural heritage management (Zhang et al., 2024).

Future research seeking to compare Medan and Brunei empirically should adopt comparable research designs. Comparability could be strengthened through aligned informant criteria, interview guides, observation periods, and content types. Online practices should be examined in relation to family ties, community contexts, and offline experiences, with appropriate safeguards for personal data and participant consent. These principles are consistent with calls for contextualization in digital research (Forberg & Schilt, 2023; Cocq & Liliequist, 2024; Stepnik, 2024). The present article offers only a conceptual starting point for such an agenda.

4. Conclusion

This exploratory study indicates that social media provides an important entry point through which young people in Medan encounter Deli Malay culture. Informants most readily recalled Istana Maimun, traditional attire, dance, cuisine, and cultural event documentation, whereas Malay language and pantun were less prominent in their reported experiences. This pattern suggests that digital cultural representation often privileges readily recognizable visual elements, making supplementary narratives necessary to retain historical and social context.

Informants' participation ranged from viewing and liking to saving, sharing, verifying sources, discussing content, and attending cultural events. Social media may increase curiosity and appreciation, but it does not automatically produce in-depth understanding

or ethnic identification. Differences among Siti, Rizky, and Kevin demonstrate that cultural identity is heterogeneous and negotiated through family background, personal experience, and relationships with the city's history.

Strengthening social media's role in preserving Deli Malay culture requires content creators to verify facts and cite sources, cultural communities to contribute to content validation, and schools and universities to support documentation projects and intergenerational learning. Digital content should also be connected to direct cultural activities. Under these conditions, social media can serve not only as a promotional environment but also as a resource for learning, participation, and the continued care of cultural heritage.

Visual content analysis of six screenshots identified representations of cuisine, performance and attire, the Istana Maimun heritage site, and organizational or community markers. These observations complement interview themes at the level of representation but do not establish changes in users' identities. Limited image resolution, the unavailability of complete posts and comments, and differences between account profiles and search results constrain assessments of authenticity, historical accuracy, and audience participation. Future studies should collect complete posts and record collection dates before comparing accounts or observation periods. From a transnational Malay perspective, the review of scholarship on Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia underscores the importance of distinguishing identity contexts, language practices, and forms of participation. Deli Malay culture may be situated within cross-border conversations without disregarding the particularity of its history and communities. The study did not, however, compare national populations; its empirical conclusions remain limited to five informants in Medan and six analyzed screenshots. Multilingual content development, cross-community collaboration, and comparative research are proposed agendas rather than demonstrated outcomes.

Theoretically, these findings extend Hall's perspective on cultural representation and identity by demonstrating that digital encounters with cultural heritage involve negotiated meanings rather than automatic processes of ethnic identification. The study also reinforces the relevance of participatory culture by distinguishing superficial digital interactions from meaningful engagement that connects online experiences with cultural practices. Practically, the findings highlight the need for cultural communities, content creators, and educational institutions to develop contextually accurate digital narratives, strengthen source verification, and facilitate direct participation in cultural activities. Integrating digital communication with community-based cultural education may therefore support cultural awareness, inclusive belonging, and more sustainable heritage preservation without reducing cultural identity to online visibility.

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Appendix. List of Informants

1) Rizky Pratama, aged 20, university student, Instagram and TikTok user, Medan (17 October 2026).

2) Siti Aulia Rahma, aged 22, university student, actively shares cultural content, Medan (17 October 2026).

3) Kevin Wijaya, aged 24, young professional from a non-Malay family, Medan (17 October 2026).

4) Muhammad Fadli, Deli Malay cultural community activist, Medan (18 October 2026).

5) Andika Syahputra, local cultural content creator, Medan (18 October 2026).