

Cultural Literacy and Youth Participation in Preserving Local Culture: An Empirical Study among Young Generations in Indonesia

Yandira Arizki Fatiha^{*}, Ebyghael Joito Nababan², Destri Natalia Telaumbanua³, Mahfuzi Irwan⁴

¹⁻⁴Universitas Negeri Medan, Medan, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The preservation of local culture faces increasing challenges amid globalization, digitalization, and shifting youth lifestyles. Cultural literacy plays a crucial role in shaping young people's awareness, attitudes, and participation in safeguarding cultural heritage. This study aims to analyze the level of cultural literacy and the extent of youth participation in preserving local culture. A quantitative descriptive approach was employed, involving young respondents aged 18–25 years. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measuring cultural literacy dimensions—cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, critical understanding, and cultural participation. The findings indicate that most respondents demonstrate moderate to high levels of cultural literacy, particularly in cultural awareness and symbolic understanding. However, active participation in cultural preservation activities remains relatively limited and tends to be symbolic rather than practical. The results suggest that while young people possess basic cultural knowledge, gaps persist between cultural understanding and concrete participatory actions. Strengthening cultural literacy through education, digital media engagement, and community-based cultural programs is essential to foster sustainable youth participation in local cultural preservation.

ABSTRACT

The preservation of local culture faces increasing challenges amid globalization, digitalization, and shifting youth lifestyles. Cultural literacy plays a crucial role in shaping young people's awareness, attitudes, and participation in safeguarding cultural heritage. This study aims to analyze the level of cultural literacy and the extent of youth participation in preserving local culture. A quantitative descriptive approach was employed, involving young respondents aged 18–25 years. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measuring cultural literacy dimensions—cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, critical understanding, and cultural participation. The findings indicate that most respondents demonstrate moderate to high levels of cultural literacy, particularly in cultural awareness and symbolic understanding. However, active participation in cultural preservation activities remains relatively limited and tends to be symbolic rather than practical. The results suggest that while young people possess basic cultural knowledge, gaps persist between cultural understanding and concrete participatory actions. Strengthening cultural literacy through education, digital media engagement, and community-based cultural programs is essential to foster sustainable youth participation in local cultural preservation.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 October 2025
Accepted 30 November 2025

KEYWORDS

cultural literacy; youth participation; local culture; cultural preservation; Indonesia

KATA KUNCI

literasi budaya; partisipasi pemuda; budaya lokal; pelestarian budaya; Indonesia

* **Corresponding Author:** Yandira Arizki Fatiha (Yandiraarizki@gmail.com)



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Introduction

The sustainability of local culture increasingly depends on the ability of younger generations to understand, value, and actively participate in cultural preservation. This issue has become more critical in the context of rapid globalization, urbanization, and digital transformation, which have significantly reshaped patterns of cultural transmission worldwide.

According to UNESCO (2018), more than 40% of the world’s intangible cultural heritage is at risk of decline, primarily due to weakening intergenerational transmission and reduced youth involvement in traditional practices.

In developing countries such as Indonesia, these challenges are further intensified by demographic and technological factors. Indonesia is currently experiencing a demographic bonus, with young people aged 16–30 accounting for approximately 25–27% of the total population (Badan Pusat Statistik [BPS], 2023). At the same time, digital penetration has reached unprecedented levels. National data indicate that over 78% of Indonesian youth are active internet users, with an average daily screen time exceeding 8 hours, largely dominated by social media and entertainment content (APJII, 2023). While digital connectivity expands access to information and cultural content, it also shifts cultural engagement from communal and practice-based activities to individualized and mediated experiences.

Globalization offers opportunities for intercultural exchange; however, it also accelerates cultural homogenization, often marginalizing local traditions, indigenous knowledge, and intangible cultural heritage (Appadurai, 1996). Young people, as the most digitally connected generation, are disproportionately exposed to global popular culture. International surveys show that more than 70% of youth cultural consumption globally is oriented toward transnational media products, such as global music, films, and digital trends, while engagement with local cultural practices continues to decline (UNESCO, 2021). Without adequate cultural literacy, this imbalance may weaken young people’s attachment to local cultural values and reduce their sense of responsibility toward cultural preservation.

Cultural literacy extends beyond the mere recognition of cultural symbols or traditions. It encompasses the ability to interpret cultural meanings, critically reflect on cultural change, and translate cultural understanding into participatory action (Hirsch, 1987; UNESCO, 2013). From this perspective, cultural literacy is not only a cognitive capacity but also a social and civic competence that enables individuals to navigate cultural diversity while maintaining cultural identity and contributing to cultural sustainability. Hirsch’s framework emphasizes shared cultural knowledge as the foundation of social cohesion, while UNESCO highlights cultural literacy as a key driver of inclusive development and intercultural dialogue.

Empirical evidence suggests that although many young people express positive attitudes toward local culture, their participation often remains superficial or symbolic. Studies conducted in various cultural contexts reveal that youth engagement is increasingly limited to digital consumption, online sharing, or symbolic endorsement of cultural content, rather than active involvement in cultural production or community-based practices (Fleming, 2016; Wang & Wong, 2020). For example, a cross-national study by Hoskins et al. (2016) found that fewer than 35% of young respondents regularly participated in traditional cultural activities, despite reporting high levels of cultural appreciation. This pattern indicates a persistent gap between cultural awareness and actual participation. Table 1 summarizes empirical studies highlighting the discrepancy between youth cultural awareness and active participation, demonstrating a consistent pattern across different cultural contexts.

Table 1. Summary of Empirical Evidence on Youth Cultural Awareness and Participation

Study	Context	Key Findings	Implication
Fleming (2016)	Youth cultural engagement in diverse cultural settings	Youth show positive attitudes toward local culture, but engagement is largely symbolic and limited to digital consumption and online sharing.	High cultural awareness does not automatically lead to active cultural participation.
Wang & Wong (2020)	Youth and digital culture	Cultural engagement among youth increasingly occurs through social media and digital platforms	Digital engagement tends to replace, rather than reinforce,

Study	Context	Key Findings	Implication
Hoskins et al. (2016)	Cross-national youth study	rather than direct cultural practices. Fewer than 35% of young respondents regularly participate in traditional cultural activities despite high cultural appreciation.	community-based cultural participation. A persistent gap exists between cultural awareness and actual cultural participation.

In the Indonesian context, existing research has largely emphasized cultural education within formal schooling or community-based cultural programs. However, empirical studies that systematically link cultural literacy levels with youth participation in cultural preservation remain limited, particularly those that examine cultural literacy as a multidimensional construct encompassing knowledge, awareness, critical reflection, and value internalization. Moreover, few studies have explored how digital culture reshapes the ways young people engage with local traditions, either as a challenge or as a potential resource for cultural sustainability.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the level of cultural literacy among young people and examine how it relates to their participation in preserving local culture. By integrating cultural literacy theory with empirical data on youth participation, this study addresses an important research gap and contributes to the growing body of literature on cultural sustainability, youth engagement, and cultural education. The findings are expected to provide evidence-based insights for educators, policymakers, and cultural institutions in designing strategies that strengthen not only cultural awareness but also meaningful and sustained youth participation in local cultural preservation.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design to capture empirical patterns of cultural literacy and youth participation in local cultural preservation. This approach was considered appropriate as it enables systematic measurement of literacy dimensions and participation tendencies across a relatively broad respondent group.

Participants

The study involved young individuals aged 18–25 years, representing a transitional life stage in which identity formation, cultural orientation, and civic engagement are actively negotiated. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on young people who had regular exposure to digital media and community environments where local culture remains present.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed based on established cultural literacy frameworks (Hirsch, 1987; UNESCO, 2013). The instrument was designed to operationalize cultural literacy as a multidimensional construct rather than a single attitudinal variable. Table 1 presents the structure of the research questionnaire, which operationalizes cultural literacy and youth cultural participation as multidimensional constructs. This structure allows for a comprehensive assessment of both cognitive and behavioral aspects of cultural preservation among young people.

Table 2. Structure of the Research Questionnaire

Main Component	Dimension / Indicator	Description
Cultural Literacy Dimensions	Cultural Knowledge	Respondents' knowledge of local traditions, cultural values, symbols, and heritage elements existing in their community.
	Cultural Awareness	Respondents' sense of cultural identity, appreciation of local culture, and recognition of its importance in everyday life.
	Critical Cultural Understanding	Respondents' ability to reflect on cultural change, globalization, and external cultural influences affecting local traditions.
	Value Internalization	Respondents' commitment to preserving local culture and integrating cultural values into personal attitudes and behaviors.
Youth Cultural Participation	Participation in Cultural Events and Rituals	Respondents' involvement in traditional ceremonies, festivals, or cultural rituals within their local community.
	Engagement in Traditional Arts and Community Activities	Respondents' participation in traditional arts, cultural groups, or community-based cultural activities.
	Cultural Promotion through Digital Media	Respondents' efforts to promote, share, or disseminate local culture through social media and digital platforms.

All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The use of Likert scaling allowed for capturing variations in perceptions and behaviors related to cultural literacy and participation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques to identify dominant trends and distribution patterns across literacy dimensions and participation indicators. The results were then interpreted analytically by linking empirical findings to cultural literacy theory and relevant international research.

Result and Discussion

Based on the results of data processing from 30 statements, it can be seen that the level of cognitive awareness of the younger generation towards local culture is in the high category, indicated by an average value that ranges from 1.44–1.82 on a scale of 1 = Always to 4 = Never. Respondents consistently showed a strong awareness of the importance of local culture, cultural identity, moral values, and understanding of cultural diversity. Statements such as "I feel local culture is part of my identity" and "I believe local culture has value relevant to modern life" obtained an average of about 1.44–1.48, indicating a positive recognition of the role of local culture in everyday life.

However, when entering the real participation aspect, the results show a different tendency. Some participatory indicators obtained higher average scores (close to 2), such as "I attend local cultural events", "I talk about local culture with family or friends", and "I practice local cultural traditions at home". This shows that although they understand the importance of local culture, implementation in the form of practice is still not optimal. The indicator with the highest average is "I follow social media accounts that discuss local culture" (average 2.06), indicating that digital media is becoming the most accessible way to get to know culture, although it does not directly contribute to real preservation.

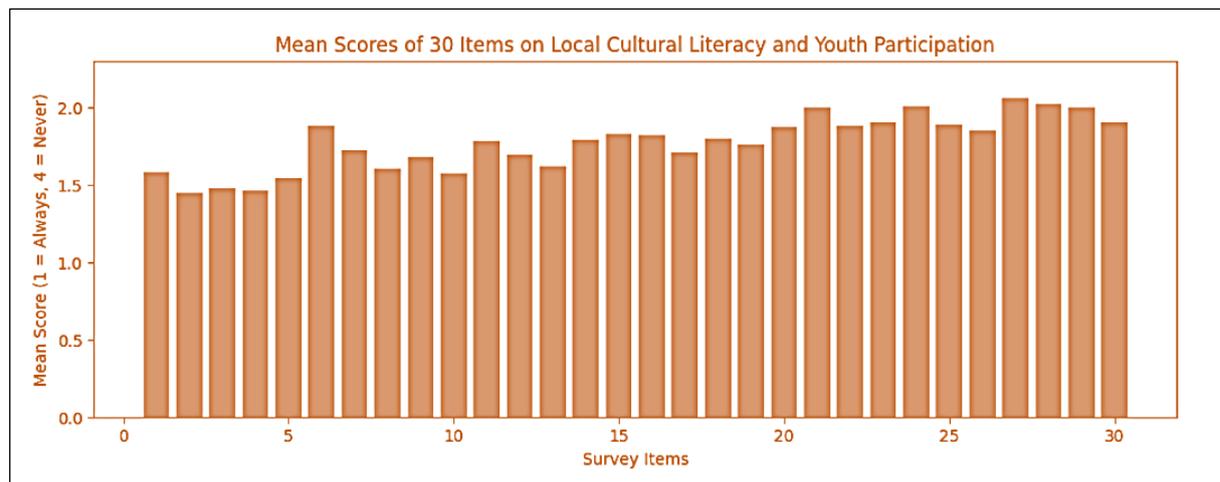


Figure 1. Mean Scores of 30 Items on Local Cultural Literacy and Youth Participation

These findings indicate a gap between knowledge and action. The younger generation has a positive attitude and high awareness of culture, but direct participation is still low, especially in community-based activities such as festivals, cultural performances, or traditional practices at home. Limited opportunities, low motivation, lack of family influence, and dominance of popular culture are factors that seem to influence respondents' behavior.

The findings reveal that the majority of respondents demonstrate moderate to high levels of cultural literacy, particularly in cultural awareness and symbolic understanding. This suggests that young people possess a foundational recognition of local culture as an important component of identity, supporting UNESCO's (2013) assertion that cultural literacy strengthens social cohesion and intercultural competence.

However, the results also indicate that critical cultural understanding remains uneven. While respondents acknowledge the influence of globalization and digital culture, fewer demonstrate the ability to critically assess how these forces reshape local cultural practices. This aligns with Jenkins et al. (2016), who argue that participatory digital culture often prioritizes visibility and consumption over reflective engagement with cultural meaning.

Regarding participation, the findings show a noticeable gap between cultural literacy and active cultural involvement. Many respondents report engaging in cultural preservation symbolically, such as sharing cultural content online, rather than participating directly in traditional practices or community-based cultural activities. Similar patterns have been observed in international studies, where youth participation increasingly occurs in mediated forms rather than embodied cultural experiences (Wang & Wong, 2020).

This gap highlights an important theoretical implication: cultural literacy does not automatically translate into participatory behavior. As Fleming (2016) emphasizes, participation requires not only awareness but also accessible cultural spaces, supportive institutions, and opportunities for meaningful engagement. Without these enabling conditions, cultural literacy risks remaining at the level of discourse rather than practice.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that digital media plays an ambivalent role. While it facilitates cultural exposure and awareness, it may also contribute to passive forms of engagement if not integrated with offline cultural experiences. This reinforces the need for hybrid cultural strategies that combine digital platforms with community-based cultural programs.

Overall, the results indicate that strengthening cultural literacy among youth must be accompanied by structural and pedagogical interventions that encourage active participation. Educational institutions, cultural organizations, and local communities play a critical role in

transforming cultural understanding into sustainable preservation practices.

The findings of this study reveal a nuanced pattern of cultural literacy among the younger generation, characterized by strong cognitive and attitudinal awareness but comparatively weaker behavioral participation. This pattern aligns closely with contemporary theoretical frameworks of cultural literacy proposed by Hirsch (1987), UNESCO (2013), and perspectives from media literacy studies.

Cultural Literacy as Knowledge and Awareness (Hirsch's Perspective)

According to Hirsch's concept of cultural literacy, literacy involves shared cultural knowledge that enables individuals to function effectively within a society. The low mean scores observed in items related to cultural identity, values, and relevance of local culture (mean range: 1.44–1.48) indicate that respondents possess a strong cognitive foundation of cultural literacy. This suggests that young people are familiar with cultural symbols, traditions, and values and recognize their importance in shaping personal and collective identity.

Similar patterns have been observed in international studies. For example, Kendall and McDougall (2012) found that young people often demonstrate high levels of cultural awareness without corresponding levels of cultural engagement. This supports the interpretation that cultural knowledge alone does not automatically translate into active cultural participation.

Critical Cultural Awareness and Global Cultural Influences (UNESCO Framework)

UNESCO's framework emphasizes cultural literacy as a means of fostering cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue, and social cohesion. The findings suggest that respondents demonstrate awareness of cultural change and the influence of modern life on local traditions, reflecting critical cultural understanding. However, the relatively higher mean scores on participation-related items indicate that globalization and contemporary lifestyles may dilute direct engagement with local culture.

This phenomenon mirrors findings from Tomlinson (2012) and Appadurai (1996), who argue that global cultural flows reshape youth identities, often prioritizing global popular culture over localized practices. While respondents appreciate local culture conceptually, their limited involvement in traditional rituals and community-based activities reflects the tension between global cultural consumption and local cultural preservation.

Digital Media and Symbolic Participation (Media Literacy Perspective)

One of the most salient findings is that the highest mean score (2.06) was associated with following local culture-related content on social media. From a media literacy perspective, this indicates a shift toward symbolic and mediated cultural participation, rather than embodied or experiential engagement.

International research supports this interpretation. Jenkins et al. (2009) argue that digital media facilitates participatory culture, but participation often remains limited to consumption, sharing, and symbolic endorsement rather than sustained cultural practice. Similarly, Buckingham (2015) emphasizes that digital literacy enhances access and awareness but does not necessarily foster deep civic or cultural engagement without supportive social structures.

The Knowledge–Action Gap in Cultural Preservation

The results point to a clear knowledge–action gap, where cultural literacy remains primarily cognitive and attitudinal rather than behavioral. This gap has been widely documented

in cross-cultural research. Hoskins et al. (2016) found that youth engagement in cultural preservation is strongly influenced by institutional support, family transmission, and community opportunities—factors that may be limited or absent in respondents' environments.

The dominance of digital culture, reduced intergenerational interaction, and limited community-based cultural programs may collectively constrain opportunities for meaningful cultural participation. As a result, young people become culturally aware observers rather than active cultural actors.

Implications for Cultural Education and Policy

These findings highlight the need to move beyond awareness-based cultural education toward participatory, experiential, and community-driven cultural programs. Digital platforms, while effective for raising awareness, should be strategically integrated as gateways to offline cultural engagement rather than substitutes for it. Strengthening school–community partnerships, revitalizing cultural events, and involving youth in creative cultural production may help bridge the gap between knowledge and practice.

Conclusion

This study examined the level of cultural literacy and cultural participation among the younger generation in the context of local cultural preservation. The findings demonstrate that young people possess a high level of cultural awareness, identity recognition, and appreciation of local cultural values, indicating a strong cognitive and attitudinal foundation of cultural literacy. However, this awareness is not consistently translated into active and sustained cultural participation, particularly in community-based cultural activities and traditional practices.

The results reveal a clear knowledge–action gap, where cultural literacy remains predominantly symbolic and mediated through digital platforms rather than embodied through direct cultural engagement. While social media has become a key channel for accessing cultural information, its role is largely limited to passive consumption and symbolic support, which alone is insufficient to ensure long-term cultural sustainability. This condition reflects broader global trends in youth culture shaped by digitalization and globalization, where local traditions compete with dominant popular culture.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for integrated cultural preservation strategies that move beyond awareness-raising initiatives. Policymakers should prioritize programs that actively involve young people in cultural production and community-based cultural practices. This includes strengthening cultural education in schools, supporting local cultural festivals, and creating inclusive spaces where youth can engage in traditional arts, rituals, and cultural innovation.

Digital platforms should be strategically leveraged as bridging tools that connect online cultural exposure with offline participation. Cultural institutions and local governments may collaborate with youth communities to develop digital campaigns that encourage participation in real-world cultural activities rather than solely promoting cultural content consumption. Furthermore, policies that support intergenerational cultural transmission are essential to ensure continuity of cultural knowledge and practice.

Academically, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on cultural literacy by providing empirical evidence of the divergence between cultural awareness and participation among youth. The findings support theoretical perspectives from Hirsch, UNESCO, and media literacy scholars, emphasizing that cultural literacy must be understood as a multidimensional

construct encompassing knowledge, critical awareness, and practice.

Future research is encouraged to explore longitudinal approaches to examine how cultural literacy develops over time and how digital engagement may evolve into sustained cultural participation. Qualitative studies may also provide deeper insights into the motivational and contextual factors influencing youth involvement in cultural preservation. Additionally, comparative studies across regions or cultural settings could further enrich understanding of how local and global cultural dynamics interact in shaping youth cultural behavior.

In conclusion, strengthening cultural literacy among the younger generation requires a shift from knowledge-centered approaches toward participatory and experiential cultural engagement. By aligning educational practices, digital strategies, and cultural policies, stakeholders can empower youth not only to understand and appreciate local culture but also to actively sustain and transmit it in an increasingly globalized world.

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