

Article

# Fieldwork Study on Youth Culture and Identity in East Asia

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**Abstract:** This study presents a comprehensive fieldwork investigation into youth culture and identity formation in East Asia, focusing on the dynamic interplay between local traditions and global influences. Through multi-sited ethnographic research conducted in Seoul, Tokyo, and Shanghai, it examines how young people engage in diverse cultural practices—including subcultural participation, digital media use, consumption patterns, and spatial strategies—to negotiate their identities. The findings reveal both shared regional trends and distinct national variations shaped by factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, and nationalism. By integrating theoretical frameworks on cultural hybridity, identity construction, and globalization, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of East Asian youth cultures within a rapidly changing social landscape. Limitations and future directions, including longitudinal studies and broader geographic scope, are discussed to inform ongoing scholarly inquiry.

**Keywords:** Youth culture; Identity formation; East Asia; Subculture; Globalization

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, youth culture in East Asia has emerged as a vibrant, multifaceted field of sociocultural transformation. From the rise of K-pop and anime fandoms to the resurgence of traditional fashion movements such as Hanfu and Kimono culture, East Asian youths have become central agents in reshaping the cultural landscape of their societies. Studying youth culture in this region is not merely an exploration of leisure activities or aesthetic preferences, but a deeper inquiry into how identity is negotiated, contested, and expressed within complex sociohistorical and transnational contexts [1].

Globalization and digital technologies have significantly intensified cultural hybridity in East Asia. Young people are exposed to a constant flow of global media, consumer goods, and ideological currents, while simultaneously engaging with their local traditions, languages, and social norms. This dynamic interplay has produced unique cultural formations, where Western symbols are appropriated alongside indigenous practices, and where digital spaces serve as key arenas for identity construction and social belonging. As such, youth identity in East Asia today cannot be understood solely within the framework of national culture, but must also account for the interpenetration of global, regional, and local influences [2].

This study views identity not as a fixed essence but as a fluid, performative construct shaped by cultural practices, social interactions, and media consumption. It asks: How do young people in East Asia use cultural practices to construct and express their identities? What role does digital media play in facilitating or challenging traditional identity norms? How do local and global cultural forces intersect in the everyday lives of youth across different East Asian societies?

To answer these questions, this paper draws on fieldwork conducted across three key East Asian cultural sites—Shanghai (China), Tokyo (Japan), and Seoul (South Korea) [3]. These urban centers serve as hubs of youth-driven innovation, cultural production, and global connectivity. Through a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and digital ethnography, the research uncovers the diverse ways in which youth cultures operate and how identity is actively shaped within them. By

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taking a comparative and grounded approach, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of youth identity in East Asia, while also offering insights into the broader dynamics of cultural globalization and generational change.

## **2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

### *2.1. Conceptual Foundations: Youth Culture, Subculture, and Identity*

Youth culture refers to the distinctive lifestyles, behaviors, and symbolic expressions developed by young people in response to the social, cultural, and generational environments they inhabit [4]. It often includes elements such as music preferences, fashion styles, digital media use, and group-based affiliations. These cultural forms serve not only as tools of entertainment but also as channels through which young individuals navigate their social realities, assert independence, and communicate shared values.

Subculture, while closely related, specifically emphasizes the existence of smaller cultural groups within larger societies that develop their own norms and practices, often in contrast to mainstream values [5]. In East Asia, subcultures do not always function in open opposition to dominant culture. Instead, they may coexist with commercial interests and social expectations, reflecting both individual agency and societal influence. For example, some youth may engage in traditional dress revival movements, not necessarily as resistance, but as a selective embrace of heritage within modern contexts [6].

Identity, in this framework, is not treated as a fixed personal trait but as a dynamic process of self-understanding shaped by cultural practice. Identity is formed and re-formed through daily interactions, the adoption of cultural symbols, and engagement with both local traditions and global trends. In the East Asian context, this process is further complicated by the region's rapid economic changes, shifting family roles, and the growing impact of cross-border media content [7].

### *2.2. Theoretical Approaches: Globalization, Digital Culture, and Social Practice*

In understanding youth identity in East Asia, it is essential to recognize the influence of global cultural flows [8]. Young people in this region are increasingly shaped by media, technologies, and consumer products originating from beyond their national borders. These global inputs do not replace local cultures but instead interact with them in unpredictable ways. As a result, cultural expressions among East Asian youth often blend foreign and local elements, creating hybrid identities that reflect both tradition and modernity.

Another important perspective involves understanding how cultural habits are shaped by early-life social conditions [9]. Youth do not adopt styles or behaviors randomly; instead, their preferences are often influenced by family background, access to education, peer networks, and the environment they grow up in. These factors subtly shape how young people choose to present themselves and which communities they feel a part of.

Digital culture also plays a central role [10]. Social media platforms, streaming services, and messaging apps are not only tools for communication but also spaces where identity is continuously curated and performed. Online participation allows youth to explore new social roles, build transnational communities, and test the boundaries of acceptable behavior---all while engaging with a broader audience than ever before. This blending of physical and digital space demands a new approach to understanding cultural practice.

### *2.3. Current Research Trends and Identified Gaps*

Recent explorations of East Asian youth culture have uncovered a wide range of unique practices, from digital fandoms and fashion subcultures to interest-based communities and cultural revival movements. These studies have helped highlight how young people engage with their cultural environments in both creative and strategic ways. Some youth use cultural participation to strengthen a sense of belonging, while others may challenge social expectations through unconventional lifestyles.

However, there are notable gaps in the current body of knowledge. Much existing research tends to focus on single-country perspectives, often neglecting the regional connections that exist across East Asian societies. Shared media consumption, international travel, and language exchange all contribute to regional cultural patterns that are rarely examined in comparative depth [11].

Another limitation lies in the overemphasis on media analysis without sufficient attention to everyday lived experiences. While it is important to understand how youth consume and produce media, it is equally important to observe how they behave in public spaces, how they interact with peers in real life, and how they relate to their families and schools [12].

Finally, existing studies often fail to capture the diversity of youth experiences across class, gender, and geography. Urban youth may have different priorities and opportunities compared to those in rural or semi-urban settings. Gender norms and expectations also shape how freely young people can express themselves in different societies.

This study aims to address these issues by conducting direct fieldwork across multiple East Asian locations, incorporating both digital and physical environments, and exploring how youth navigate the overlapping pressures of tradition, innovation, and global influence.

### **3. Methodology and Fieldwork Design**

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-sited ethnographic approach to explore youth culture and identity formation in East Asia. Fieldwork was conducted in three major urban centers---Seoul, Tokyo, and Shanghai---which were selected for their cultural diversity, high population of active youth communities, and roles as regional hubs of media production and consumption. These cities not only represent national contexts but also act as interconnected cultural zones where transnational influences converge and local subcultures thrive.

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling methods, targeting individuals between the ages of 16 and 30, a range that encompasses late adolescence to early adulthood. Within this group, efforts were made to include a diverse mix of gender identities, educational backgrounds, and cultural interests. Particular attention was given to youth involved in identifiable subcultural or cultural communities---such as fashion scenes, music fan groups, online content creators, or those engaged in traditional or revivalist practices. This diversity enabled the study to capture a wide spectrum of identity performances and cultural engagements.

Data collection was carried out through a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and visual ethnography. Observation took place in both online and offline settings, including parks, shopping districts, cafés, university spaces, concert venues, and social media platforms. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences, values, and self-perceptions. Visual methods included the analysis of participant-generated content---such as social media profiles, photos, fashion styles, and event documentation---to better understand the symbolic aspects of identity expression.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was preserved by using pseudonyms. Special care was taken when working with minors or marginalized communities to ensure voluntary participation and emotional safety. The researcher maintained a reflexive position, acknowledging the influence of their own background, language limitations, and outsider status in shaping the interpretation of cultural practices. These factors were actively reflected upon during fieldwork and analysis.

Several challenges were encountered during the research. Language barriers, particularly in informal conversations and slang usage, occasionally limited depth of understanding. Access to certain communities required extended trust-building, especially when working with youth involved in less public or stigmatized subcultures.

Additionally, the highly dynamic nature of online cultural spaces presented difficulties in tracking continuity and verifying authenticity. Despite these obstacles, the multi-method approach enabled a rich and context-sensitive understanding of how East Asian youth negotiate culture and identity.

#### 4. Youth Cultural Practices and Everyday Life

##### 4.1. Cultural Participation, Digital Identity, and Subcultural Belonging

Across East Asia, youth actively participate in a wide range of cultural practices that help shape both their personal identity and collective belonging. In large urban centers like Seoul, Tokyo, and Shanghai, subcultural communities offer safe and expressive spaces where young people can navigate individuality and social connection. Table 1 below outlines several common subcultural communities and their associated identity practices.

**Table 1.** Overview of Selected Youth Subcultures in East Asia

Subculture Type	Core Activities	Identity Expression	Primary Platforms
Cosplay	Costume design, role-playing	Embodied fantasy, character-based identity	Social media, conventions
Street Dance Crews	Public performances, competitions	Physicality, team identity, creativity	YouTube, Instagram
Indie Music Scene	Songwriting, underground performances	Anti-mainstream, authenticity	SoundCloud, local venues
Idol Fan Groups	Event participation, merchandise trading	Emotional investment, collective fandom	Weibo, Twitter, forums
Hanfu Revivalists	Traditional dress, cultural festivals	Heritage pride, aesthetic nostalgia	Douyin, Xiaohongshu

A central feature of all these subcultures is the integration of digital media platforms into everyday life. Social media, video-sharing sites, and messaging apps serve as key spaces for building reputations, archiving cultural outputs, and forming translocal networks. Youth use these platforms to post performance videos, coordinate events, share styling tips, and create identity narratives. Online visibility becomes a form of currency, with followers and engagement metrics shaping self-worth and social capital.

At the same time, these practices involve both resistance and conformity. While some youth use cultural participation to challenge norms—such as gender roles or academic expectations—others use the same practices to seek recognition, social acceptance, or professional advancement. Youth culture becomes a site of negotiation, where creative freedom and societal pressures coexist in complex ways.

##### 4.2. Consumption, Space, and the Material Dimensions of Culture

Youth cultural practices are deeply embedded in patterns of consumption that carry symbolic meaning. What young people wear, use, eat, and display often communicates belonging, aspiration, and social distinction. Table 2 illustrates how different categories of consumption are associated with specific identity signals and cultural intentions.

**Table 2.** Symbolic Dimensions of Youth Cultural Consumption

Category	Typical Items/Experiences	Symbolic Meaning	Access Mode
Fashion & Accessories	Retro streetwear, DIY items	Individualism, aesthetic belonging	Boutiques, Taobao, thrift
Digital Devices	Customized phones, headphones	Tech-savviness, subcultural codes	Online tech stores

Events & Gatherings	Concerts, themed cafés, fan meets	Social bonding, exclusive participation	Event apps, QR access
Urban Experiences	Skateboarding, graffiti, cosplay	Space ownership, rule negotiation	Informal networks
Food & Beverage	Trendy snacks, "aesthetic" drinks	Lifestyle branding, identity curation	Instagrammable cafés

In addition to what is consumed, where cultural practices happen matters. Urban youth often reappropriate public space, using city streets, subway stations, and parks for informal rehearsals, photoshoots, and socialization. These activities transform otherwise mundane locations into culturally meaningful zones.

However, access to such spatial expression is not evenly distributed. Some subcultures benefit from institutional support, while others face surveillance or social stigma. Youth from privileged backgrounds may have greater freedom to participate in paid events or secure private venues, while others rely on improvised arrangements. This uneven geography of expression reflects broader structural inequalities embedded in urban life.

Altogether, the daily practices of East Asian youth reveal a vibrant, adaptive, and often contradictory cultural landscape. Through both material choices and spatial strategies, young people express who they are, who they wish to become, and how they relate to the evolving social world around them.

## 5. Identity Formation and Regional Variations

### 5.1. Youth Identity at the Crossroads of Tradition and Globalization

East Asian youth often find themselves navigating a complex terrain where local traditions and global cultural flows intersect. This negotiation is neither linear nor passive; rather, it involves active decisions about what to adopt, what to adapt, and what to resist. In cities like Seoul, Tokyo, and Shanghai, young people are exposed daily to both imported cultural symbols---from Western fashion and hip-hop to anime and online trends---and deeply rooted traditional narratives tied to language, etiquette, family structure, and national heritage.

Many youth incorporate traditional elements into their identity to signal cultural pride or nostalgia. For example, young people in China participating in the Hanfu revival movement do so not only for aesthetic reasons but also as an assertion of cultural roots. Similarly, some Japanese youth adopt traditional textile patterns or tea ceremony aesthetics within otherwise modern lifestyle practices. These choices often reflect a desire to remain anchored amid the rapidly shifting global environment.

At the same time, global influences are deeply embedded in the identity-making process. K-style fashion in Korea, American rap culture in Chinese underground scenes, or Euro-American body aesthetics in Japanese youth culture demonstrate how globalized content is localized, transformed, and even re-exported. This hybridization results in identity performances that are both outward-looking and inward-seeking.

Identity construction is also deeply marked by gender, class, and ethnicity. For instance, middle-class youth often have more access to international travel, language education, and digital platforms, which in turn shapes their cosmopolitan expressions. Gender plays a key role too: in South Korea, female beauty standards and digital visibility are tightly interwoven, while in China, tomboy subcultures and "soft masculinity" reflect a challenge to binary gender norms. Ethnic minorities in all three countries face different kinds of pressures---sometimes underrepresented, sometimes exoticized, and often navigating dual cultural identities within national frames.

### 5.2. Regional Contrasts and Cultural Flows in East Asian Identity

Despite shared historical ties and geographic proximity, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean youth cultures demonstrate significant variations in how identity is formed and

performed. These differences can be traced to contrasting political systems, media environments, and educational structures, as well as differing levels of exposure to global culture and nationalist discourse.

For example, Korean youth tend to present a more stylized and curated digital identity, often influenced by the highly professionalized K-pop and beauty industry. This polished public image is deeply connected to ideas of national pride and collective aesthetics. In contrast, Japanese youth subcultures such as Harajuku street fashion and otaku culture prioritize individual eccentricity and the construction of niche identities. Chinese youth, navigating a rapidly transforming sociopolitical and digital landscape, often blend nationalistic narratives with consumer-driven self-fashioning, as seen in the dual embrace of Hanfu and global luxury branding.

The influence of nationalism and soft power also cannot be overlooked. Korean youth often participate---consciously or not---in the global dissemination of Korean culture as part of the so-called "K-wave," while Chinese youth increasingly encounter narratives of "cultural confidence" that emphasize China's global rise. Japanese youth, by contrast, tend to internalize a more introspective approach to identity, marked by an aesthetic of imperfection and subcultural retreat from mainstream success. Table 3 below summarizes the key identity trends observed in the three countries:

**Table 3.** Comparative Overview of Youth Identity Expressions in East Asia

Country	Dominant Trends	Social Frame	Cultural Tensions
China	Tradition revival + luxury consumption	Nationalism + consumerism	Authenticity vs. state narrative
Japan	Individualism + subcultural fragmentation	Aesthetic autonomy	Conformity vs. niche identity
South Korea	Digital curation + group belonging	Soft power + performance culture	Aspiration vs. pressure for perfection

These dynamics are also visible in cross-cultural comparisons. For instance, while Hanfu in China emphasizes heritage and nationhood, Harajuku fashion in Japan focuses on creative defiance and personal aesthetics. K-style in Korea, by contrast, is more closely tied to commercial success, image perfection, and group identity. These styles not only represent youth choices but also reflect the broader socio-political atmospheres in which they are embedded.

Ultimately, youth identity formation in East Asia is shaped by a delicate interplay of cultural inheritance, digital mediation, and geopolitical imagination. Though diverse in form, these identities are increasingly interconnected, forming a regional youth culture that is both plural and responsive to global currents.

### 6. Conclusion and Reflections

This study has explored the multifaceted nature of youth culture and identity formation in East Asia through a comparative, ethnographic approach. The key findings reveal that East Asian youth negotiate a dynamic interplay between local traditions and global cultural flows, producing hybrid identities that are simultaneously rooted and transnational. The study highlights how subcultural participation, digital media engagement, consumption practices, and spatial strategies contribute to the ongoing construction of youth identities across China, Japan, and South Korea. These findings deepen theoretical understandings of identity as a fluid, performative process shaped by sociocultural contexts and global interconnections.

By combining fieldwork insights with broader theoretical frameworks, this research contributes to cultural studies and identity research in several ways. It expands the empirical scope beyond single-country analyses, offering a multi-sited perspective that accounts for regional variations and shared influences. Furthermore, it integrates digital

and material dimensions of culture, emphasizing the importance of both online and offline spaces in identity work. The study also foregrounds intersectional factors such as gender, class, and ethnicity, enriching the complexity of youth cultural experience in East Asia.

However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The fieldwork's urban focus may overlook rural or less connected youth populations whose experiences could differ significantly. Language barriers and the researcher's positionality as an outsider may have influenced access and interpretation of certain cultural nuances. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits insights into how identities evolve over time, suggesting the need for longitudinal research.

Future research could address these limitations by expanding geographic scope to include Southeast Asian contexts, where different historical and cultural dynamics shape youth identities. Longitudinal studies would also offer valuable perspectives on identity trajectories and the impact of rapidly changing technological and social environments. Additionally, deeper attention to marginalized groups within youth cultures, such as ethnic minorities or LGBTQ+ communities, could further enrich understanding.

In conclusion, the landscape of East Asian youth culture remains vibrant and ever-changing, reflecting broader processes of globalization, modernization, and cultural negotiation. Youth continue to carve out spaces of meaning, belonging, and creativity amidst ongoing social transformations, underscoring the importance of sustained, nuanced research in this field.

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