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Cultural Identity as Communicative Accomplishment: Social Identity Processes among Flores Migrants in Surabaya

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Abstract
This study aims to examine how Flores migrants in Surabaya negotiate and maintain their cultural identity through interpersonal, communal, and digital communication within an urban Javanese setting. The research focuses on the communicative practices of Flores migrant communities and the digital discourse surrounding NTT (Nusa Tenggara Timur) and Flores identity on social media platforms. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with five Flores migrants in Surabaya and netnographic analysis of YouTube videos and public comments related to NTT identity representation. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, the findings reveal three core themes: (1) boundary communication through embodied markers such as skin color, accent, and ethnic names; (2) constructing belonging through relational language, communal rituals, and traditional dress; and (3) performing pride through digital narratives that counter stigma and affirm cultural heritage. The results demonstrate that digital discourse provides spaces for public articulation of NTT identity, while face-to-face community interactions reinforce solidarity and mutual support among migrants. This study concludes that cultural identity is not merely a psychological resource but a dynamic communicative process through which Flores migrants negotiate difference, recognition, and belonging in multicultural urban life.

Keywords: *Cultural Identity; Flores Migrants; Cross-Cultural Communication; Digital Discourse; Social Identity Theory*

1. Introduction

Internal migration in Indonesia is more than a movement of labor; it is a confrontation between diverse ethnic identities within a hierarchical social landscape. For migrants from Eastern Indonesia (Flores) moving to Javanese urban centers like Surabaya, this journey involves navigating a dominant cultural hegemony. Identity shifts and challenges in constructing a sense of belonging require individuals to continuously renegotiate who they are within unfamiliar sociocultural settings. In many cases, Eastern Indonesian migrants are subjected to social categorization based on physical markers and accents, requiring them to actively manage their group image. Recent research on Indonesian migrants demonstrates that maintaining strong ingroup cohesiveness and empathy is a vital strategy for constructing a positive social identity while navigating a new social landscape (Hasanuddin et al., 2025). This context forces individuals to interpret differences and negotiate belonging in ways that are fundamentally communicative.

Cultural identity has long been viewed through a psychological lens as a matter of "culture shock" or adaptation (Bhugra & Becker, 2005; Ward et al., 2001).

More broadly, cultural identity encompasses the shared meanings, beliefs, and practices through which a community understands itself and distinguishes itself from others (Barker & Jane, 2016; Hall, 1990). At the same time, social identity refers to an individual's awareness of membership in a social group and the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Giles & Johnson, 1987). However, this study argues that identity is not a static psychological state but an ongoing communicative accomplishment (Jenkins, 2008) . This is evident in how traditions are not merely "kept" but are actively negotiated through open dialogue and familial support to meet modern challenges (Daku & Setyawan, 2025)

For the Flores community, communal rituals and traditional values serve as vital communicative resources. The Flores migrant community in Surabaya represents an important case of identity maintenance in a multicultural Javanese environment. The active communication and reaffirmation of Flores' identity through community gatherings, mutual support, and regional languages suggest that this community does more than simply preserve tradition; it performs "positive distinctiveness" in a dominant Javanese setting (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Recent scholarship shows that whether through the intergenerational transmission of ritual meanings (Farida & Setyawan, 2024) or the active involvement of the youth in cultural preservation (Robinson & Setyawan, 2025),

communication remains the primary vehicle for sustaining group cohesiveness in a multicultural environment.

A critical gap in existing migration literature is the lack of integration between offline communal life and the "digital diaspora." While face-to-face gatherings in Surabaya provide immediate social capital, digital platforms like YouTube have emerged as a secondary public sphere where Flores' identity is circulated, contested, and reinforced (Kozinets, 2019). These mediated representations shape how migrants see themselves and how they are perceived by the public, making it essential to examine identity negotiation across both physical and digital domains.

Representations of NTT communities on YouTube, along with audience comments and online reactions, contribute to broader discourses about who eastern Indonesians are, how they are perceived, and what kinds of cultural values become associated with them in the public sphere. These mediated representations matter because they shape not only external perceptions but also how migrant communities see themselves and take pride in their identity. For this reason, examining cultural identity in contemporary migrant life requires attention to both interpersonal communication within the community and digital discourse beyond it. Although previous studies have examined migration, adaptation, and identity, there is a notable gap in research that integrates both offline communal interaction and digital representation, particularly for Eastern Indonesian migrants in Java. Existing discussions often emphasize adaptation difficulties or psychological adjustment, while giving less attention to the communicative practices through which identity is named, displayed, defended, and valued in multicultural urban life.

Drawing on Social Identity Theory (SIT), this study aims to examine how Flores migrants in Surabaya construct and maintain their cultural identity through social categorization, identification, and comparison. By analyzing both communal interactions and digital discourse, this research contributes to communication scholarship by demonstrating that identity in the digital age is a hybrid performance. It moves beyond simple notions of "assimilation" to show how marginalized groups use communicative agency to assert their place within a dominant cultural environment.

2. Research Method

2.1 Research design

This study employed an interpretive qualitative case study design. In alignment with the communicative focus of the research, the case is defined as the 'communicative construction' of identity, treating identity as an interactional achievement rather than a fixed psychological variable. A

qualitative case study was considered appropriate because it enables an in-depth exploration of contemporary social phenomena within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2014), particularly the communicative practices through which cultural belonging is negotiated in migration settings.

This design was selected because the study does not approach identity as a fixed psychological attribute, but as an ongoing communicative process shaped through interaction, symbolic expression, communal practices, and mediated discourse. To capture both offline and mediated dimensions of identity construction, the study combined two qualitative sources of data: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Flores migrants and digital discourse observation informed by netnographic sensibilities (Kozinets, 2019). The integration of these sources follows a 'complementary' logic: FGDs provide depth into personal experiences, while YouTube discourse reveals how those identities are performed and contested in the public sphere. Figure 1 illustrates the sequential stages of the research process, from problem formulation to the derivation of conclusions and implications.

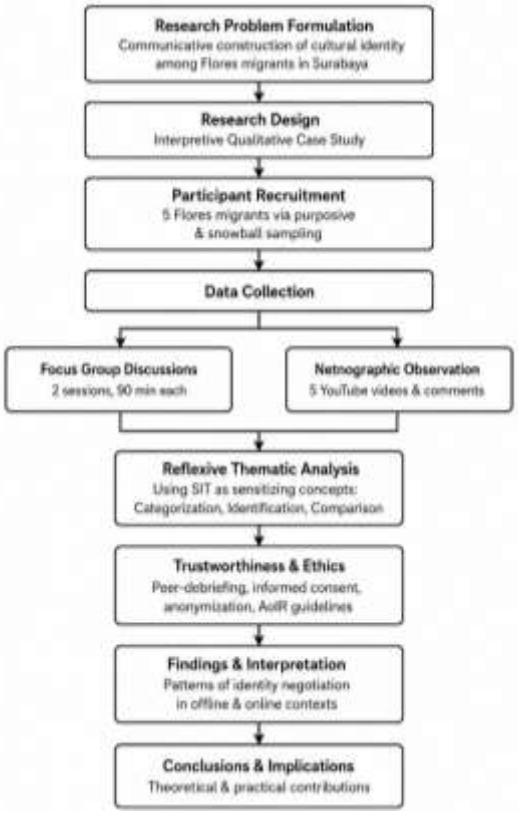

Figure 1. Research Design Flowchart

The digital observation component was informed by netnographic sensibilities. (Kozinets, 2019), particularly in its attention to naturally occurring online discourse and public cultural expressions. However, the study did not aim to conduct a full-scale netnography involving prolonged immersion in a single online community. Instead, YouTube content and audience comments were treated as mediated discursive materials that reflect public articulations and negotiations of NTT identity in digital environments.

The collected data were then classified using the dimensions of Social Identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) before being analyzed thematically to find patterns regarding social categorization, identification, and social comparison. The next stage involved organizing and synthesizing qualitative data to produce a more coherent understanding of the dynamics of the migrants' cultural identity. This process concluded with the preparation of interpretive reflections and research implications, which provided theoretical and practical contributions related to the identity experiences and cultural adaptation of migrant communities in an urban context.

2.2 Participants

The study involved five participants from the Flores migrant community residing in the Kutisari Area of Surabaya. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling via migrant community networks in Surabaya. While this approach effectively accessed individuals with shared migration experiences, the researcher acknowledges its potential for homophily bias, whereby referred participants may hold similar views. To mitigate this, diversity was intentionally built into the sample across migration duration (2 months to 20 years) and ethnolinguistic background (Ende Lio, Manggarai, Lamaholot, and Nagekeo). The final sample comprised five participants (two women, three men) spanning early to middle adulthood, with varied statuses as students and workers, enabling a breadth of perspectives on identity negotiation and community life in Surabaya.

The study did not seek statistical generalization, but rather interpretive depth regarding how cultural identity is communicatively negotiated within a specific migrant context. The relatively small number of participants enabled more focused discussion and deeper exploration of shared meanings, interactional experiences, and communicative practices.

2.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in early November 2025 through two complementary methods: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and digital discourse observation of YouTube content. These methods were

used to generate a richer understanding of how Flores migrants communicate their identity in both offline and online contexts.

The FGDs were conducted face-to-face in two sessions involving the five participants. Two sessions were conducted to reach 'thematic saturation' regarding the participants' shared narratives. Each session used a semi-structured discussion guide and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The discussions were facilitated by the researcher, who used probing questions and follow-up prompts to encourage deeper reflection and balanced participation among participants. Attention was also given to minimizing participant domination and encouraging quieter participants to contribute their experiences. Particular attention was given to communicative elements such as language use, accent, naming practices, symbols, rituals, and expressions of solidarity. To address potential power dynamics or 'groupthink', the moderator explicitly encouraged dissenting views and ensured that newer migrants (2-month residency) felt safe to share experiences that might differ from long-term residents. All discussions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

To complement offline data, netnographic observation was conducted on five purposively selected YouTube videos related to NTT identity, migration, and eastern Indonesian cultural representation. Selection criteria included explicit relevance to the research focus, substantial audience engagement, public accessibility, and reflection of recurring public narratives surrounding Flores or NTT communities. Five videos were chosen for their sufficient discursive variation and thematic relevance. The online material was not treated as representative of all Flores migrants, but as mediated discourse contributing to the circulation of meanings around NTT identity, with analysis focusing specifically on naturally occurring discourse, particularly how commenters employ linguistic markers and stereotypes to construct group boundaries.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Creswell, 2018) The analysis began with repeated reading of the FGD transcripts, video transcripts, and selected online comments to gain familiarity with the material as a whole. The analysis involved several iterative stages, including data familiarization, initial open coding, focused coding, thematic categorization, and interpretive synthesis. During the coding process, the researcher identified recurring communicative patterns, symbolic expressions, identity labels, interactional narratives, and forms of belonging that emerged across both offline and digital data.

Instead of treating Social Identity Theory (SIT) as a rigid container, the researcher used its core concepts, categorization, identification, and comparison, as 'sensitizing concepts' to organize the emergent codes. To enhance trustworthiness (credibility), the researcher employed 'investigator triangulation' through peer-debriefing sessions with academic supervisors to challenge initial assumptions and minimize premature analytical closure.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with qualitative research ethics in order to protect the rights, dignity, and comfort of participants. Prior to the discussions, participants were informed verbally about the aims of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the use of audio recording, and their right to withdraw at any time. Verbal informed consent was obtained before the discussions began.

To protect confidentiality, participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms in the research report. Audio recordings, transcripts, and field notes were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher. In presenting the findings, care was taken to avoid exposing identifying details that might compromise participants' privacy.

The research strictly adhered to the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) ethical guidelines for digital data. For the netnographic observation component, the study used only publicly accessible YouTube videos and comments. While YouTube comments are public, the researcher anonymized all usernames and removed specific metadata to prevent 'digital re-identification'. The researcher remained attentive to ethical concerns related to digital discourse, including issues of stereotyping, representation, and contextual sensitivity toward Eastern Indonesian communities. To minimize digital traceability, usernames from public comments were partially anonymized in the presentation of findings. In addition, comments containing potentially harmful or inflammatory stereotypes were interpreted contextually rather than reproduced uncritically. The selected videos were also chosen based on their relevance to discussions of NTT identity and migration rather than popularity alone, in order to maintain alignment with the interpretive focus of the study.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings are drawn from participants with diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds and migration histories within the Flores migrant community in Surabaya. This diversity enabled the study to

capture how cultural identity is communicatively negotiated across different stages of migrant experience. (see table 1).

Table 1. Profile of Participants

Name*	Gender	Ethnicity	Migration Status	Length of Migration
Oni Tukan	Female	Ende Lio	Worker	6 years
Lea Dhae	Female	Manggarai	College Student	20 years
Baskara Nuba	Male	Lamaholot	Worker	10 years
Devon Paga	Male	Nagekeo	Worker	11 years
Ruslan Kewa	Male	Nagekeo	Worker	2 months

*Participant names are presented in pseudonyms, with the addition of family names to reflect the social and cultural context of Flores.

The findings are organized into three interpretive themes that reflect how Flores migrants communicatively construct group boundaries, belonging, and positive distinctiveness within both offline and digital environments.

Table 2. Table of themes

Main Theme	Subtheme	Initial codes
Communicating Group Boundaries	self-labeling as Eastern/NTT/Flores identity	from the east; Flores person; from NTT
	bodily markers as visible identity signs	skin color; physical appearance
	accent and language as ethnic markers	accent; language
	identity clarification in response to misrecognition	from papua; i explain
	public recognition and labeling in mediated discourse	NTT people are genuine; they live simply
Constructing Belonging	kinship language as symbolic family bonding	considered family; both migrants
	emotional support within the migrant community	homesick; confide in

Main Theme	Subtheme	Initial codes
	mutual aid and trust-based solidarity	save money; social funds; trust each other
	Brotherhood as a moral obligation	brotherhood; my problems
	shared suffering and collective care	one suffers; we all feel
	traditional dress and objects as symbolic communication	wear a sarong, traditional clothing
	cultural values of hard work and family responsibility	family's future; earn money; seek experience
	language barriers in intercultural adaptation	Speak Javanese; don't understand
	adaptation through mixed language practices	mix indonesian; still maintain
	Comparison between urban life and communal culture	modernized lives; stronger togetherness
Performing Pride and Negotiating Stereotypes	dance and celebration as markers of social closeness	always dancing; become close
	everyday hospitality as proof of solidarity	accepted right away; no hesitation
	kinship and belonging as the community's strength	togetherness; kinship; belonging
	positive public narratives of eastern identity	"*sa bangga*"; happy; love peace

It is important to note that while the three themes correspond to the three core processes of Social Identity Theory (categorization, identification, and comparison), the data do not merely confirm the theory. Rather, they extend it by revealing that these processes operate simultaneously across physical and digital communicative spaces, and that each process involves tensions and contradictions that complicate a straightforward application of SIT.

3.1 Theme 1: Communicating Difference and Cultural Boundaries

The findings show that Flores migrants construct cultural boundaries through recurring communicative markers such as self-labeling, accent, bodily appearance, and everyday acts of identity clarification. Rather than functioning merely as cognitive categories, labels such as orang timur, orang NTT, and orang Flores operate as socially meaningful communicative resources that signal belonging within multicultural interaction. One participant explained that even after living in Java for many years, his identity remained recognizable through visible and audible markers:

> "*It's like I still feel like a Flores person even though I'm living in Java... I can feel it from my skin color... from my language too, my accent too. The characteristics, in terms of physical appearance, are definitely visible. We are from the east..."* (Devon Paga, 11 years in Surabaya).

Devon's statement illustrates that social categorization is not merely a cognitive process occurring "in the head," but a communicative event accomplished through embodied signs that are read, interpreted, and responded to by others in interaction. His use of the phrase "we are from the east" signals a deliberate act of collective self-categorization, positioning himself within a group identity rather than an individual one.

This was particularly evident when participants described being mistakenly identified by outsiders. Ruslan, for instance, explained:

> "*I'm often suddenly mistaken for being from Papua... I just explain where I'm from... I'm not from Papua, I'm from NTT."* (Ruslan Kewa, 2 months in Surabaya).

Here, identity is not simply possessed; it must be verbally clarified and defended. Such moments illustrate that migrants do not passively receive labels from the environment, but actively negotiate social boundaries through explanation and correction. This clarification of identity reflects the process of boundary making, which is an active effort to maintain differentiation between groups so that identities remain clear and do not become mixed (Wimmer, 2018). Recent research shows that groups with ethnic identities that have prominent physical characteristics tend to experience more frequent automatic categorization from outside, so they strengthen the expression of their group identity to maintain clarity of category (Rule & Sutherland, 2017). However, this process of boundary-making is not without contradiction. While Ruslan insists on differentiation from Papua, this very act of "correction" implicitly reproduces the regional hierarchy within Eastern Indonesia itself,

positioning NTT as categorically distinct from (and arguably "above") Papua in ways that mirror the broader Indonesian racial imaginary. This suggests that social categorization among marginalized groups is not simply a response to dominant group misrecognition, but also involves internal boundary policing that reproduces inter-regional stereotypes.

These mediated narratives do more than describe NTT culture. They circulate publicly recognizable images of "Orang NTT" identity that shape how migrants are imagined within broader Indonesian discourse. Digital communication, therefore, becomes an important site where collective identity is publicly affirmed, simplified, and sometimes stereotyped:

> *"NTT people are the most cheerful people in the world... Eastern communities live simply, fishing and singing, relaxed..."* (Mananta, 2023)

Meanwhile, another video emphasizes the importance of tolerance and interfaith harmony:

> *"Our harmonious life in NTT... tolerance is very important... it brings peace and happiness..."* (NTTViral93., 2019)

Yet, it is crucial to acknowledge a methodological and interpretive caveat here: YouTube comments and video narratives are not equivalent to ethnographic data. They are shaped by algorithmic curation (which promotes emotionally charged content), the performative nature of public self-presentation, and the possibility of comment deletion or bot activity. (Kozinets, 2019) . The expression "Sa Timur, Sa Bangga," for instance, may function less as a genuine reflection of everyday identity and more as a performative declaration designed for public circulation. This does not invalidate its significance; performativity is itself a communicative strategy, but it requires that we interpret digital data as 'staged identity work' rather than transparent self-report.

The reinforcement of social categories also emerged from comments made by viewers, both from NTT and outside NTT. One viewer described the people of NTT as friendly and "genuine," even stating that being in NTT made him *"forget what Jakarta was like*" because of the warm social atmosphere (User A, 2 years ago). Another viewer from Java reinforced positive mixed stereotypes: *"The people are nice even though they talk like they want to pick a fight, but they are compassionate and love peace..."* (User B, 5 years ago)

This phenomenon reflects ambivalent positive stereotypes, those that appear harsh but are understood as expressions of warmth or sincerity (Fiske et al., 2018). External recognition from outgroup members further

reinforces ingroup cohesion and collective self-esteem, as supported by the Common Ingroup Identity Model (Gaertner et al., 1993), which shows that perceiving a shared superordinate identity reduces bias and strengthens social bonds, while positive intergroup contact reinforces belonging (Hässler et al., 2021)

Nevertheless, such "positive stereotypes" are not ideologically neutral. By constructing NTT people as "simple," "cheerful," and "close to nature," these representations risk reproducing a colonial imaginary that positions Eastern Indonesians as pre-modern subjects, warm but unsophisticated, communal but economically marginal. This paradoxically reinforces structural subordination precisely when "positive" traits align with dominant narratives of cultural primitivism, extending SIT by revealing the ideological costs of certain forms of positive distinctiveness. Taken together, the findings show that "Easterner/NTT" identity functions as a strong, multi-layered social category constructed through physical markers, dialect, preserved cultural values, shared migration experiences, and outgroup recognition.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that social categorization among Flores migrants is communicatively accomplished through recurring acts of naming, clarification, recognition, and differentiation. Identity boundaries are therefore not passively inherited, but continuously negotiated within everyday intercultural encounters and mediated public discourse.

3.2 Theme 2: Constructing Belonging through Communal Communication

The second finding shows that Flores migrants construct belonging through recurring communicative practices such as kinship language, emotional support, mutual aid, ritual participation, and symbolic cultural display. Through these interactions, identity is not merely remembered as a shared origin but enacted as a lived social relationship. Social identification refers to how individuals define themselves as part of a social group and internalize values, symbols, and shared meanings (Haslam et al., 2020). A recurring pattern in the FGD was the use of kinship language to transform co-migrants into a symbolic family. Lea Dhae explained:

> *"So, people from there, if they migrate anywhere and find out that someone is from the east... they are still considered family... even if there is no blood relationship... like I know Kak Oni from Ende, and I am also from Manggarai... so we are family, because we are both migrants.. and if when you're homesick, it's like having friends to confide in "* (Lea Dhae, 20 years old in Surabaya)

Lea's statement reveals a communicative mechanism that extends beyond what SIT traditionally describes as "identification." Here, identification is not simply a cognitive act of self-labeling but a relational accomplishment: it requires the active use of kinship terms ("Kak," "family") to discursively transform strangers into intimate others. This finding suggests that for migrant communities, social identification is performed through what might be called "relational recategorization", the communicative act of upgrading co-ethnic strangers into fictive kin.

Figure 2. Regular meetings of Flores Surabaya friends. Source: documentation of participants.

Communal practices also played a major role in identity performance. Participants described regular gatherings, collective savings, and mutual aid systems as central to the life of the community. Oni Tukan noted:

> "*We save money together... for example, if a friend is sick, we use social funds. The important thing is to be open, transparent, honest, and trust each other... especially when it comes to money."* (Oni Tukan, 6 years in Surabaya)

The value of solidarity demonstrated by Oni is in line with the concept of *collective efficacy*, which is the belief of a group that they can support each other and solve problems together despite facing obstacles and difficulties (Feltz et al., 2001). Terms such as openness, honesty, and trust indicate that solidarity is maintained through communicative norms governing everyday cooperation. The community does not merely claim togetherness, but performs it through accountable interaction and reciprocal care. Participants also emphasized that Flores' identity is

communicated through material and ritual symbols (see figure 3). Baskara explained:

> "*Everyone who attends must wear a sarong... that is the custom, even though it is still practiced here, bring traditional sarongs, traditional clothing, accessories, machetes, headbands. Those are the material identities that we bring with us wherever we go.*" (Baskara Nuba, 10 years in Surabaya)

Figure 3. The use of traditional NTT cloth shows that group identity is preserved even in a foreign land.

Cultural symbols such as sarongs and traditional accessories transform identity into a publicly visible performance of belonging within an urban migrant environment. This supports Robinson & Setyawan (2025) argument that participation in cultural tradition strengthens collective identity, cultural pride, and social cohesion through shared symbolic practices. In migration contexts, such symbols are especially significant because they allow the community to make its cultural presence legible within a dominant Javanese urban environment. The use of these symbols is in line with recent findings on material expressions of identity, namely, how group identity is strengthened through cultural objects that are brought or used in everyday life (Douglas & Isherwood, 2021).

However, communal belonging is not experienced uniformly. Data reveal that newer arrivals like Ruslan Kewa (2 months) participated with notably less confidence in communal rituals compared to long-term residents like Baskara (10 years), suggesting that belonging is not automatic

upon ethnic recognition but progressively earned through sustained communicative participation. Moreover, the emphasis on collective obligation, while empowering, may create implicit pressure on newer or less-resourced migrants to conform to communal expectations they are not yet positioned to meet.

The YouTube data support this finding. NTT individuals often associate themselves with being hard workers for the sake of their family's future:

> "*Migrating is not just about shaping the future, "Migrating money. Many NTT people prefer to migrate... for their family's future." (NTTViral93., 2019b)*

This value is in line with family-centered collectivism, which is a collective orientation that places family as the main goal in life decisions (Campos et al., 2014) . In the video comments section, NTT identity is also associated with religious tolerance:

> "*I am proud to be from NTTI am a Muslim woman who wears a veil I feel safe everywhere... my non-Muslim brothers and sisters welcome me."* (User C, 6 years ago)

This comment disrupts the monolithic construction of NTT identity as exclusively Catholic/Christian by highlighting a Muslim identity within the NTT framework, a communicative act termed "internal diversification" that challenges essentialist representations from within. This nuances SIT by demonstrating that identification is not only about what unites the group, but also about how internal diversity is communicatively managed without fracturing collective cohesion. As Gallo (2015) suggests, migrants actively navigate complex social expectations through strategic self-assertion; similarly, User C's performance functions as an emotional and communicative strategy that sustains group cohesion while accommodating internal difference.

3.3 Theme 3 : Performing Pride and Negotiating Stereotypes in Digital Space

The third finding shows that Flores migrants use social comparison to construct a positive image of their group in relation to the surrounding cultural environment. In communication terms, this comparison operates through stories, evaluations, and public narratives that contrast Flores or NTT values with those associated with urban Java. These comparisons do not simply differentiate groups; they create a positive moral account of who "we" are. One of the clearest areas in which comparison emerged was language and everyday interaction. Participants repeatedly described

difficulty understanding Javanese speech and adapting to local communication styles. Oni Tukan stated, "*Interacting with my coworkers was difficult because of the language... they often spoke Javanese, which I didn't understand...*"

A similar situation was experienced by Baskara Nuba, who has lived in Surabaya for 10 years. He said, "*My friends here always speak Javanese, which we don't understand eventually, whether we like it or not, we have to learn to adapt.*"

These linguistic adjustments illuminate an important dimension largely absent from standard SIT accounts: the role of structural communicative power. The expectation that migrants accommodate dominant local norms not the reverse reflects the hegemonic position of Javanese language and culture, revealing that social comparison does not occur on a level playing field but is shaped by asymmetrical power relations that determine the communicative terms of inclusion (Giles & Johnson, 1987). Nevertheless, shared linguistic difficulty also strengthens ingroup solidarity among migrants, and participants did not frame these differences purely negatively, comparison also served to affirm the perceived strengths of Flores and NTT culture. Lea Dhae, for example, contrasted urban life with the communal atmosphere she associated with NTT:

> "*Other people or communities may have modernized their lives while we have known customs and traditional life since childhood and most of our people have a stronger sense of togetherness there.*"

She further added:

> "*In NTT whatever the event, there will always be dancing that's what makes us get to know each other and become close... Easterners like to party, like to dance, hehehe..*"

Participants frequently associated dance and celebration with experiences of social closeness and communal interaction, framing these practices as important spaces for relationship-building and collective expression. Meanwhile, Baskara emphasizes how solidarity is expressed in small, spontaneous acts of acceptance:

> "*Not lastly, always feeling accepted through small things, which are also unintentional in every meeting. For me, it's almost every day... Even though Devon isn't related to me, not family or anything, I said, 'Please, can we go to your house? We'll sit there for a bit, my friend needs to work on an assignment Devon immediately replied, 'Okay, okay. So I was accepted*

right away, without any hesitatin, just like that..." (Baskara Nuba, 10 years in Surabaya)

Narratives of Flores community hospitality and emotional responsiveness function as communicative resources that reinforce collective belonging and moral solidarity within migrant life (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001; Gubrium & Colomer, 2025; Pun, 2018) constructing positive comparison not through abstract claims but through everyday storytelling. Critically, however, these narratives of communal warmth may also function as "compensatory identity work": a strategy through which structurally marginalized groups construct moral superiority precisely because material or political superiority is unavailable to them. By framing togetherness as their defining strength, migrants may inadvertently accept economic marginalization as a trade-off for "authentic" communal life. Without diminishing the genuine emotional significance of these practices, this reading situates them within broader structural conditions that constrain what forms of positive distinctiveness are available to particular groups (Yuval-Davis, 2016).

The YouTube videos further emphasize the social comparisons:

"Easterners are happy because they have nothing to compare themselves to… comparisons only lead to envy and unhappiness (Mananta, 2023)

There are also comparisons related to work, education, and the economy:

"*There are more job options in big cities wages in NTT are lower tuition and food costs are cheaper in Java that's what drives many people from NTT to migrate.*" (NTTViral93., 2019b)

This economic comparison is particularly revealing. While it constructs NTT migrants as brave and tenacious ("berani merantau"), it simultaneously reproduces the structural inequality that necessitates migration in the first place. The narrative frames migration as individual courage rather than as a response to uneven national development, thereby depoliticizing what is fundamentally a structural issue. From a communication perspective, this illustrates how digital narratives can simultaneously empower group identity while obscuring the material conditions that produce marginality. In Youtube comments, social comparisons become increasingly explicit:

"*Best wishes for success to all those in the diaspora maintain your attitude and behavior because the good name of NTT is attached to your body*" (User D, 6 years ago)

"*Sa Timur, Sa Bangga* 💕🥰 "(User E, 2 years ago)

Expressions such as "Sa Timur, Sa Bangga" illustrate how digital discourse transforms cultural identity into publicly shareable pride. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, these expressions reflect positive distinctiveness, in which group members construct and communicate a favorable social identity to reinforce collective self-esteem and belonging (Ellemers et al., 1999). However, this pride carries an inherent tension: User D's instruction to "maintain your attitude and behavior because the good name of NTT is attached to your body" reveals that collective identity functions not only as empowerment but also as a disciplinary mechanism. When publicly circulated in digital spaces, positive distinctiveness can become a form of communal policing, where individual failures are framed as threats to collective dignity, complicating SIT's emphasis on the psychological benefits of group identification by exposing its costs to individual autonomy. From a communication perspective, the significance lies not only in intergroup comparison itself, but in how identity is publicly narrated, circulated, and collectively affirmed through everyday interaction and mediated discourse, enabling migrants to negotiate cultural difference while sustaining collective dignity and belonging (Trepte & Loy, 2017).

To summarize the theoretical contribution across all three themes: this study extends Social Identity Theory by demonstrating that categorization, identification, and comparison are not merely cognitive processes but are communicatively accomplished through embodied markers, relational language, ritual participation, and digital performance. Furthermore, the data reveal that these processes are neither seamless nor free of contradiction, they involve internal boundary policing, implicit conformity pressures, compensatory identity work, and the paradox of "empowering stereotypes" that simultaneously affirm and constrain group members. These findings suggest that future applications of SIT to migrant contexts must attend more carefully to the communicative mechanisms through which identity is both constructed and contested.

4. Conclusion

The empirical findings converge around three interconnected processes: boundary-making through embodied markers and labeling practices that both affirm distinctiveness and reproduce hierarchical distinctions; communal practices and relational language that perform solidarity while revealing intra-group heterogeneity across religious,

generational, and regional lines; and digital platforms as ambivalent spaces where cultural pride coexists with surveillance, essentialization, and identity oversimplification.

Theoretically, the study extends SIT by demonstrating that positive distinctiveness is never achieved in a power-neutral vacuum but is always conditioned by structural position and hegemonic discourse. The concept of communicative accomplishment is refined beyond mere interactional achievement to encompass compensatory work against structural marginalization, the co-constitution of pride and surveillance, and political negotiation over whose cultural categories gain legitimacy, repositioning it as an inherently political process embedded in material conditions.

Crucially, migrant communal practices function as survival infrastructure rather than mere cultural expression, operating within conditions of labor exploitation, housing discrimination, and bureaucratic marginalization. The study cautions against celebrating migrant agency without acknowledging the constrained structural conditions within which it operates, as identity work can buffer marginalization while simultaneously obscuring structural injustice by reducing systemic problems to matters of cultural recognition alone. Practically, the findings call for migrant communities to be more strategic in digital self-representation, for urban policies to move beyond symbolic diversity frameworks toward addressing concrete structural inequalities, and for practitioners to attend carefully to intra-group diversity rather than assuming a monolithic Flores or NTT identity.

The study acknowledges that its small participant pool and cannot represent the full diversity of Flores migrant experience in Surabaya, let alone in other Indonesian cities. The five YouTube videos analyzed, while purposively selected for thematic relevance, constitute a narrow slice of the vast and heterogeneous online discourse surrounding Eastern Indonesian identity. These limitations mean that the findings should be understood as interpretive illustrations of communicative processes rather than generalizable claims about all Flores migrants or all digital identity discourse.

Future research should build directly from the gaps this study exposes. First, longitudinal designs could trace how identity negotiation shifts across different migration stages revealing whether compensatory identity work intensifies or transforms over time. Second, multi-platform digital ethnography would capture how platform-specific affordances differently shape identity performance, given that this study's limitation to YouTube likely overrepresents performative and public-facing discourse while missing more intimate or contested negotiations. Third, research

foregrounding the experiences of marginalized subgroups within the migrant community could reveal identity processes that diverge from or are silenced by dominant collective narratives. Fourth, rather than generic comparison across migrant groups, future work might examine how structural position (rather than cultural content) shapes identity possibilities, comparing, for instance, how Eastern Indonesian migrants in different labor sectors or housing conditions construct identity differently despite shared ethnolinguistic backgrounds.

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