



Understanding Cultural Identity Formation through Heritage Awareness and Cultural Tendency among Generation Z

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Abstract

Cultural heritage tourism offers younger generations opportunities to engage with cultural values, yet the psychological process by which cultural awareness becomes cultural identity remains poorly understood. This study examines the relationships among Cultural Heritage Awareness, Cultural Tendency, and Cultural Identity and investigates Cultural Tendency's mediating role among Generation Z tourists. This quantitative explanatory study used a cross-sectional survey of 119 Generation Z tourists who visited Vredenburg Fort, Yogyakarta. Data were collected via a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) in SmartPLS. The results show that Cultural Heritage Awareness significantly affects Cultural Identity ($\beta = 0.299$; $p = 0.011$) and Cultural Tendency ($\beta = 0.833$; $p < 0.000$). Cultural Tendency also significantly affects Cultural Identity ($\beta = 0.641$; $p < 0.000$). Furthermore, Cultural Tendency significantly mediates the relationship between Cultural Heritage Awareness and Cultural Identity ($\beta = 0.534$; $p < 0.000$), indicating partial mediation. These findings suggest that cultural identity formation is a sequential psychological process in which awareness of cultural heritage develops into Cultural Tendency and ultimately contributes to cultural identity. The study extends Social Identity Theory in heritage tourism and highlights the importance of meaningful, participatory, and reflective heritage experiences for Generation Z.

Keywords *Cultural Heritage Awareness, Cultural Tendency, Cultural Identity, Social Identity Theory*

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage tourism helps preserve cultural values, strengthens community identity, and supports sustainable development. However, its sustainability depends not only on physical conservation but also on engaging younger generations as future custodians of cultural values (Alnaim, 2026; Vadrucchi, 2025). This issue is particularly relevant to Generation Z, whose cultural experiences are shaped by digital media and global cultural flows. Exposure to global popular culture may broaden cultural perspectives while shaping young people's values, orientations, and perceptions of local culture (Cho, 2023; Hong et al., 2025). Heritage destinations therefore need experiences that foster meaningful connections with cultural heritage.

In heritage tourism, cultural identity is an important outcome because it can strengthen visitors' sense of belonging, appreciation of local culture, and engagement in heritage preservation (Jiang, 2023; Xiao et al., 2025). Cultural Heritage Awareness (CHA), defined as an individual's understanding of the value, meaning, and significance of cultural heritage, provides a cognitive foundation for interpreting cultural symbols, history, and values (Heredia-Carroza et al., 2025). Yet awareness alone may not explain identity development, as individuals may understand cultural heritage without adopting or internalizing its values as part of their cultural orientation.

Cultural Tendency (CT) may help explain this transition, defined as an individual's inclination to adopt, internalize, and express cultural values in thought and behavior. Previous

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studies suggest that cultural awareness enhances appreciation, engagement, and emotional connections with heritage (Nobre & Sousa, 2022; Jiang, 2023), while cultural orientation and internalization contribute to cultural identity (Manago & McKenzie, 2024; Thorpe et al., 2025). However, research has more often examined CHA and Cultural Identity (CI), or cultural orientation and CI, separately. Empirical evidence on the relationship between CHA and CT remains limited, particularly in Indonesian heritage tourism among Generation Z. Understanding how awareness develops into cultural orientation may therefore clarify the psychological process of cultural identity formation.

Drawing on Social Identity Theory, this study proposes an integrated model in which CHA denotes awareness of cultural heritage, CT denotes orientation toward and internalization of cultural values, and CI denotes cultural identity. The model examines whether CHA contributes to CI both directly and indirectly through CT. Accordingly, this study examines the causal relationships among Cultural Heritage Awareness, Cultural Tendency, and Cultural Identity among Generation Z tourists visiting Vredeborg Fort in Yogyakarta. By integrating these constructs, the study seeks to explain the psychological mechanism underlying cultural identity formation in heritage tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains identity formation as a psychological process in which individuals recognize and identify with meaningful social groups based on shared values, norms, and symbols (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A central process is social categorization, in which individuals recognize characteristics associated with a particular group, followed by social identification, in which group values and meanings are internalized as part of the self-concept, fostering belonging and attachment (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987).

In cultural heritage tourism, historical narratives, cultural symbols, artifacts, and local values may facilitate these processes. In this study, Cultural Heritage Awareness denotes recognition and understanding associated with social categorization; Cultural Tendency denotes the internalization and orientation associated with social identification; and Cultural Identity denotes the resulting identity formation. Accordingly, the model conceptualizes cultural identity formation as a process in which heritage awareness develops into cultural orientation and ultimately contributes to cultural identity.

Cultural Heritage Awareness and Cultural Identity

From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, recognizing and understanding cultural characteristics constitute an initial step in social categorization that can facilitate identification with a cultural group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Empirical studies indicate that cultural heritage awareness is associated with appreciation, belonging, engagement, and emotional connection to cultural heritage, which may contribute to cultural identity (Nobre & Sousa, 2022; Lyu et al., 2024; Černikovaitė & Karazijiene, 2025). Therefore:

H1: Cultural Heritage Awareness has a significant effect on Cultural Identity.

Cultural Heritage Awareness and Cultural Tendency

SIT suggests that awareness of cultural characteristics, values, and symbols facilitates social categorization, providing a basis for subsequent identification and internalization. In this process, awareness may evolve into an orientation toward cultural values. Previous studies indicate that cultural heritage awareness enhances appreciation, belonging, engagement, and emotional

connection with cultural heritage (Nobre & Sousa, 2022; Jiang, 2023; Lyu et al., 2024). However, empirical evidence on the relationship between Cultural Heritage Awareness and Cultural Tendency remains limited, particularly among Generation Z in heritage tourism. Therefore:

H2: Cultural Heritage Awareness has a significant effect on Cultural Tendency.

Cultural Tendency and Cultural Identity

Cultural Tendency refers to an individual's inclination to adopt, internalize, and express cultural values, norms, and practices. Within SIT, this internalization reflects social identification, in which the values and norms of a meaningful cultural group become incorporated into the individual's self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Previous research indicates that cultural orientation and the internalization of cultural values contribute to self-construction and the formation of cultural identity (Manago & McKenzie, 2024; Thorpe et al., 2025; Boyko & Boyko, 2024). Therefore:

H3: Cultural Tendency has a significant effect on Cultural Identity.

Mediating Role of Cultural Tendency

The preceding relationships suggest that cultural identity formation may occur through the internalization of cultural values rather than cultural awareness alone. Consistent with SIT, Cultural Heritage Awareness denotes recognition of cultural values, Cultural Tendency reflects their adoption and internalization, and Cultural Identity represents their incorporation into the self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Previous research supports links among heritage awareness, cultural engagement, internalization, and identity formation (Lyu et al., 2024; Jiang, 2023; Manago & McKenzie, 2024). Therefore:

H4: Cultural Heritage Awareness has a significant effect on Cultural Identity through Cultural Tendency.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a quantitative, explanatory cross-sectional survey design to examine the direct and indirect relationships among Cultural Heritage Awareness, Cultural Tendency, and Cultural Identity. The study was conducted at Vredenburg Fort in Yogyakarta, a cultural heritage tourist destination in Indonesia. The study population consisted of Generation Z tourists who had visited Vredenburg Fort. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) they were members of Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), (2) they had visited Vredenburg Fort at least once, and (3) they voluntarily completed the questionnaire. Based on Hair et al. (2017) sample size recommendations for PLS-SEM, the minimum number of respondents was set at 119. The final sample consisted of 119 respondents. Data were collected via an online questionnaire from May through July 2026. The research instrument was adapted from validated indicators in previous studies to measure Cultural Heritage Awareness - 8 items (Wang et al., 2023; Li et al., 2023; Trivyzadakis, 2023), Cultural Tendency - 8 items (Xu, Zhang, Nie, 2022), and Cultural Identity - 9 items (Zhang et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2024). All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Common-method bias (CMB) was not formally evaluated in this study. This methodological limitation is discussed in the limitations section of this study. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS software. The measurement model was evaluated for convergent validity, discriminant validity, and construct reliability. The structural model was

evaluated using path coefficients, bootstrap-based significance tests, effect sizes (f^2), and mediation analysis to test the proposed direct and indirect relationships.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Respondent Characteristics

The study included 119 Generation Z tourists who had visited Vredenburg Fort in Yogyakarta. Female respondents made up 57% of the sample, while males accounted for 43%. Most respondents were 15–20 years old (44%), followed by those 21–25 years old (42%). In terms of visit frequency, 46% were first-time visitors, while 54% had visited the site two or more times. These characteristics confirm that the respondents met the study's sampling criteria.

Table 1. Characteristics of Respondents (N=119)

Characteristic	n	%
Age		
15 – 20	52	44
21 – 25	50	42
26 – 30	17	14
Gender		
Male	51	43
Female	68	57
Frequency of visits		
1	55	46
2	29	24
3	15	13
4	6	5
≥5	14	12

Measurement Model

The measurement model was evaluated to establish the reliability and validity of the three constructs. Convergent validity was assessed using indicator loadings and average variance extracted (AVE), and internal consistency was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. The results indicate that the measurement criteria were met across the constructs. Cultural Tendency showed a composite reliability of 0.927 and an AVE of 0.613, while Cultural Identity showed a composite reliability of 0.946 and an AVE of 0.659. The corresponding values for Cultural Heritage Awareness also met the required criteria. Discriminant validity was likewise established, indicating that the three constructs represent empirically distinguishable concepts. Overall, the measurement model demonstrated adequate reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, supporting the use of the constructs in subsequent structural model and hypothesis testing.

Table 2. Factor Loading, Reliability and Validity Test

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE	Decision
Cultural Heritage Awareness	0,895	0,916	0,577	Valid & Reliable
Cultural Tendency	0,909	0,927	0,613	Valid & Reliable
Cultural Identity	0,935	0,946	0,659	Valid & Reliable

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was evaluated using path coefficients, p-values, 95% confidence intervals, and effect sizes (f^2). All hypothesized relationships were positive and statistically

significant, with confidence intervals that did not include zero. Cultural Heritage Awareness significantly affected Cultural Identity ($\beta = 0.299$; $p = 0.011$; $f^2 = 0.152$), supporting H1. Cultural Heritage Awareness also significantly affected Cultural Tendency ($\beta = 0.833$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 2.270$), supporting H2. Furthermore, Cultural Tendency significantly affected Cultural Identity ($\beta = 0.641$; $p < 0.001$; $f^2 = 0.698$), supporting H3. The mediation analysis showed a significant indirect effect of Cultural Heritage Awareness on Cultural Identity through Cultural Tendency ($\beta = 0.534$; $p < 0.001$; 95% CI = 0.335–0.722), supporting H4. Because the direct effect of Cultural Heritage Awareness on Cultural Identity remained significant alongside the indirect effect, Cultural Tendency functions as a partial mediator.

Table 3. Results of Structural Model Evaluation

Hypothesis	β	P-Value	95% Confidence Interval	F Square	Decision
H1 CHA $\rightarrow$ CI	0,299	0,011	0,080-0,538	0,152	supported
H2 CHA $\rightarrow$ CT	0,833	0,000	0,740-0,905	2,270	supported
H3 CT $\rightarrow$ CI	0,641	0,000	0,400-0,857	0,698	supported
H4 CHA $\rightarrow$ CT $\rightarrow$ CI	0,534	0,000	0,335-0,722		supported

CHA : Cultural Heritage Awareness, CT: Cultural Tendency , CI : Cultural Identity

The Effect of Cultural Heritage Awareness on Cultural Identity

The findings demonstrate a significant positive association between Cultural Heritage Awareness and Cultural Identity, indicating that greater awareness of cultural values, meanings, symbols, and historical significance is linked to stronger cultural identity among Generation Z tourists. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, this association can be understood through social categorization, in which individuals recognize the characteristics and meanings associated with a cultural group. Such recognition provides a basis for cultural belonging and identification. This finding aligns with previous studies showing that cultural heritage awareness strengthens appreciation, engagement, and attachment to cultural heritage (Nobre & Sousa, 2022; Lyu et al., 2024; Černiková & Karazijene, 2025). Thus, Cultural Heritage Awareness is an important initial condition for cultural identity formation.

The Effect of Cultural Heritage Awareness on Cultural Tendency

H2 highlights how cultural heritage awareness can extend beyond cognitive understanding to shape individuals' orientation toward cultural values. Awareness is therefore not merely passive knowledge but may foster greater receptiveness to cultural meanings, values, and practices. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, this relationship reflects a transition from social categorization to social identification, as recognition of cultural characteristics may develop into a stronger orientation toward associated values. This process may encourage appreciation, engagement, and emotional connection with cultural heritage (Nobre & Sousa, 2022; Jiang, 2023; Lyu et al., 2024). However, empirical research on the relationship between Cultural Heritage Awareness and Cultural Tendency remains limited. The present finding therefore provides evidence that cultural awareness can serve as an antecedent to cultural orientation.

The Effect of Cultural Tendency on Cultural Identity

A particularly important finding is that a stronger orientation toward cultural values is associated with a stronger sense of cultural identity among Generation Z tourists. This relationship

suggests that Cultural Tendency provides a psychological pathway through which individuals move from recognizing cultural values to incorporating them into their sense of belonging and self-identification. Rather than merely a preference for cultural practices, Cultural Tendency reflects the extent to which cultural values are experienced, internalized, and incorporated into thinking and behavior. Within Social Identity Theory, this process corresponds to social identification, through which individuals internalize the values and meanings associated with a cultural group and incorporate them into their self-concept. Consistent with previous research ([Manago & McKenzie, 2024](#); [Thorpe et al., 2025](#); [Boyko & Boyko, 2024](#)), the finding indicates that Cultural Tendency functions as a psychological mechanism through which cultural values become part of Cultural Identity.

The Mediating Role of Cultural Tendency

Taken together, the mediation results provide the clearest evidence for the psychological mechanism proposed in this study. Cultural Heritage Awareness contributes to Cultural Identity through Cultural Tendency, indicating that awareness becomes more closely connected to identity formation when it develops into an orientation toward cultural values. Because the direct effect of Cultural Heritage Awareness on Cultural Identity remains significant, Cultural Tendency functions as a partial mediator. From the perspective of Social Identity Theory, Cultural Heritage Awareness provides an initial basis for recognizing and categorizing cultural characteristics, while Cultural Tendency reflects the subsequent internalization of cultural meanings and values through social identification. These internalized orientations can become part of the individual's self-concept and contribute to Cultural Identity. Thus, the findings support a sequential psychological mechanism linking Cultural Heritage Awareness, Cultural Tendency, and Cultural Identity. The study's novel contribution is demonstrating that Cultural Tendency functions as a psychological mechanism linking Cultural Heritage Awareness to Cultural Identity, thereby extending prior research that has primarily examined these constructs as direct or separate relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that cultural identity formation among Generation Z tourists in heritage tourism is a sequential psychological process involving Cultural Heritage Awareness, Cultural Tendency, and Cultural Identity. The findings support the proposed relationships and show that Cultural Heritage Awareness provides an initial foundation for identity formation, while Cultural Tendency mediates the internalization of cultural values and contributes to Cultural Identity. Thus, identity formation follows a sequence from cultural awareness to Cultural Tendency and ultimately to Cultural Identity.

Theoretically, this study extends Social Identity Theory in heritage tourism by providing empirical support for the link between social categorization, Cultural Tendency, and social identification. Practically, heritage destinations should move beyond information provision and design meaningful, participatory, and reflective experiences that encourage visitors, particularly Generation Z, to engage with and internalize cultural values.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, the research focused only on Vredenburg Fort, Yogyakarta, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other heritage destinations. Second, the cross-sectional design does not capture changes in cultural identity formation over time. Third, the study focused exclusively on Generation Z. Fourth, the model included only three main constructs. Fifth, the study did not formally test for common method bias, which may introduce bias because all constructs were measured in a single online questionnaire. Future research should test the

model across multiple heritage destinations, employ longitudinal designs, include other generational groups, and incorporate additional variables.

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