

Digital Brotherhood: Group Identity, In Group Bias, and Behavioral Conformity in Bandung's Esports Communities

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ABSTRACT: The rapid rise of esports in urban Indonesia has reshaped youth culture and identity, particularly in Bandung, where digital teams act as important spaces for collective belonging. This study investigates how group identity influences in-group bias and behavioral conformity among esports gamers. Using a mixed methods approach combining a survey of 150 players and in-depth interviews with 15 participants, supported by observations at local tournaments, the research revealed that stronger group identity was significantly associated with higher conformity to team norms and stronger favoritism toward in-group members. Qualitative narratives further showed that symbolic markers such as jerseys and team tags, emotional loyalty, and peer-enforced rules play a crucial role in shaping behaviors and reinforcing cohesion both online and offline. These findings highlight that esports communities serve not only as entertainment hubs but also as arenas for identity formation and social learning, suggesting the need for educational and youth development frameworks that recognize the psychosocial value of digital gaming cultures.

Keywords: Esports, Youth Identity, Social Cohesion, In-Group Bias, Symbolic Interaction, Bandung Digital Culture.



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the expansion of esports in Southeast Asia, and particularly within Indonesia, has marked a significant cultural and technological shift. This transformation has elevated digital gaming from a recreational activity into a socially embedded institution, deeply influencing youth identity, social practices, and community formation. Indonesia now stands as the largest gaming market in Southeast Asia, boasting over 62 million players and annual gaming revenues exceeding \$1.1 billion (Samudera et al., 2024). This growth is not merely economic but also cultural, with cities like Bandung leading the integration of gaming into mainstream youth life. Renowned for its creative industries, educational institutions, and youth driven innovation, Bandung has emerged as a central hub in Indonesia's digital ecosystem, where esports serve as both a popular activity and a conduit for identity construction among its urban youth.

This surge in esports participation is driven by several factors, including the widespread availability of mobile and PC based gaming platforms, improvements in internet infrastructure, and rising digital literacy. These developments have enabled players from diverse backgrounds to engage in real time, competitive gameplay and social interaction. What begins as individual participation often evolves into collective involvement through the formation of esports teams, guilds, and fan communities. Within these communities, young gamers construct, perform, and renegotiate their identities. Urban centers such as Bandung are particularly conducive to this phenomenon due to their vibrant cultural scenes, access to digital technology, and prevalence of physical venues such as gaming cafés and esports arenas. These environments become social laboratories where digital and physical experiences merge, allowing identity to be expressed both online and offline (Seddighi, 2022).

Scholars have increasingly noted the significance of digital gaming platforms in shaping youth socialization. Beyond serving as entertainment, these platforms provide structured opportunities for collaboration, communication, and emotional connection (Hossain & Fahad, 2024). Group dynamics within gaming communities mirror offline social structures, involving hierarchies, norms, and shared rituals. Through the lens of social identity theory (Kaye et al., 2018), these dynamics can be understood as processes wherein individuals adopt the roles, values, and symbols of their group, reinforcing both internal cohesion and external differentiation. Esports teams, therefore, function not only as gaming collectives but as social units where behaviors are shaped and identities are continuously negotiated.

In Indonesia, especially in urban esports communities, identity expression often takes symbolic forms such as avatars, apparel, slogans, and in-game achievements. These markers strengthen belonging but also foster in-group bias, influencing team loyalty and perceptions of rivals (Phan, 2021). This bias manifests in subtle and overt ways, influencing how players treat competitors, make decisions during team play, and construct narratives of group superiority or distinctiveness. Studies across Southeast Asia have documented similar dynamics in mobile and MMORPG communities (Jin & Schneider, 2016; Robinson, 2017)r.

Nonetheless, these processes of identity formation are not without complications. While strong group identity can lead to increased motivation, resilience, and social support, it also risks fostering exclusion, peer pressure, and ideological rigidity (Wong, 2022). In digital contexts, where anonymity and fluid boundaries are common, the reinforcement of rigid in group norms can marginalize those perceived as outsiders. Such dynamics raise critical questions about the inclusivity and psychosocial health of these communities. This is especially pertinent as digital gaming becomes increasingly central to how young people experience friendship, community, and selfhood.

Despite growing academic interest in online gaming communities in Indonesia, research remains disproportionately focused on peripheral or semi urban locales such as Gorontalo, Surabaya, and Madura. While these studies have provided valuable insights into emotional engagement and grassroots community formation, they often overlook the performative, competitive, and symbolic dimensions more visible in urban esports settings. The city of Bandung, with its unique blend of

technological infrastructure, youth activism, and digital culture, provides an ideal case for examining how identity, bias, and conformity are produced within esports ecosystems.

This study addresses this gap by examining how group identity, in-group bias, and behavioral conformity operate within Bandung's esports communities. Using a mixed methods approach with surveys, interviews, and observations, the research aims to understand how digital gaming environments mediate identity formation. The findings contribute to digital sociology, youth studies, and cultural psychology by highlighting the broader sociocultural impact of esports in Indonesian urban contexts.

METHOD

This study used a mixed methods approach to examine group identity, in-group bias, and behavioral conformity among esports gamers in Bandung. This design was chosen to capture both measurable constructs and lived experiences, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of psychosocial dynamics in esports communities.

A sequential explanatory design was employed in which quantitative data collection and analysis preceded qualitative exploration. This structure allowed survey results to inform participant selection and the development of qualitative instruments. Such a design adheres to established best practices for mixed methods research, where integration between qualitative and quantitative components enhances interpretative validity (Looman et al., 2023; Shelton et al., 2022).

Participants were recruited from gaming cafés, university esports clubs, and local tournaments in Bandung. The quantitative phase involved 150 players (aged 17–26, mostly male), followed by 15 purposively selected for qualitative interviews. Eligibility required membership in an esports team for at least three months and regular participation in team-based gameplay.

The quantitative sample comprised 150 participants aged 17 to 26, predominantly male, consistent with national gaming demographics (Samudera et al., 2024). Fifteen participants were then purposively selected for the qualitative phase based on diversity in their identity scores and conformity behaviors.

The survey integrated several validated scales:

1. **Group Identity Scale (GIS):** Developed by Brown et al., this scale assesses emotional and psychological attachment to the group. It includes subscales for group affect, cohesion, and perceived identity salience (Herrmann et al., 2019). Its reliability was verified via Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.83$).
2. **Social Identity Scale (SIS):** Assesses the degree of self-categorization, group pride, and intergroup comparison (Spector & Pinto, 2015). The scale supports multidimensional analysis and was chosen for its applicability to digital communities.

3. **In Group Bias Index:** This adapted scale included items measuring bias in decision making, emotional responses, and group loyalty. Operationalization drew from social dilemma paradigms and experimental setups (Colarossi et al., 2023).
4. **Behavioral Conformity Index:** Items were adapted from conformity literature, including the Asch paradigm and peer influence models. Participants rated their agreement with team aligned behaviors (Davis & Stanton, 2023).

Semi structured interviews focused on themes such as symbolic identity practices, in group dynamics, loyalty enforcement, and emotional attachment. The guide was informed by initial survey findings and refined iteratively. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically using NVivo, following Braun and Clarke's six step model.

Thematic coding followed best practices outlined by Ling & Royo (2024), ensuring that major and minor patterns were captured across multiple data sources. Themes were triangulated with survey metrics to test convergent validity.

Two local esports tournaments (one university based and one commercial café based) were observed for non-verbal cues, symbolic behavior, and peer interactions. Field notes captured observations regarding dress codes, chants, player roles, and rituals. These notes were coded and analyzed alongside other data sources.

Approval was obtained from an institutional ethics board. Informed consent, anonymity, and right to withdraw were guaranteed. Data handling complied with ethical protocols and data privacy standards.

All instruments underwent pilot testing (n=20). Confirmatory factor analysis and internal consistency testing ensured reliability ($\alpha > 0.80$). Qualitative data underwent member checks and peer debriefing to enhance credibility. Triangulation across methods supported findings consistency and mitigated single method bias (Willging et al., 2020).

While representative of Bandung's esports community, the sample lacked gender diversity and may not generalize to rural gaming populations. The cross sectional nature of the study also limits causal inference.

This study exemplifies mixed methods best practices by integrating validated identity and bias instruments with rich qualitative narratives. Such an approach facilitates a layered understanding of group dynamics in youth digital culture and contributes to methodological innovation in esports research (Allemang et al., 2023; Splane et al., 2023).

In summary, this methodological framework ensures rigor, relevance, and reflexivity in capturing the complex interplay between identity, behavior, and community within Bandung's dynamic esports environment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the detailed findings derived from a mixed methods investigation involving quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews conducted with esports gamers based in Bandung. The results highlight the complex interplay between group identity, in group bias, and behavioral conformity within the dynamic context of digitally mediated esports teams. These outcomes underscore the psychological and sociocultural mechanisms through which players internalize and enact their roles within esports communities. To ensure a comprehensive understanding, the findings are organized into two primary segments: quantitative analysis supported by statistical tables and figures, and qualitative insights derived from thematic coding and participant narratives.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative dataset comprises 150 valid survey responses, and statistical analysis indicates a robust correlation between the strength of group identity and both in group bias and behavioral conformity. Participants were grouped into three categories based on their identity scores: low (≤ 3.5), medium (3.6–4.2), and high (≥ 4.3).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	r (In Group Bias)	r (Conformity)
Cognitive Centrality	4.2	0.5	0.58	0.55
In group Affect	4.5	0.4	0.62	0.59
In group Ties	4.3	0.6	0.66	0.64
Total Identity Score	4.33	0.43	0.65	0.61

The data show a consistent and statistically significant correlation across all dimensions of group identity and the outcome variables. Participants classified in the high identity group demonstrated significantly elevated levels of behavioral conformity (Mean = 4.5) compared to the medium identity group (Mean = 4.0) and the low identity group (Mean = 3.6). This gradient is further visualized below.

These results are consistent with literature showing that increased identification with one's team fosters conformity to group norms, often surpassing individual preference in decision making (Peshkovskaya et al., 2017; Zeng et al., 2021). The findings also reinforce the predictive role of social identity strength in determining loyalty, team cohesion, and performance outcomes (Kaye et al., 2017; Steltenpohl et al., 2021).

Qualitative Findings

A total of 15 esports gamers participated in semi structured interviews. Thematic analysis revealed four salient patterns that elaborate the lived experiences of team identity and behavior within these communities.

Table 2: Thematic Codes from Interviews

Theme	Indicators	Frequency
Emotional Loyalty	Narratives of team success/failure and pride	13/15
Symbolic Identity	Jerseys, logos, chants, emblems	12/15
Peer Enforcement	Team rules, sanctions, verbal corrections	10/15
Role Identification	Descriptions of team duties and expectations	11/15

The theme of emotional loyalty emerged as players recounted emotionally charged experiences from team competitions both victories and defeats that served as bonding events. These stories often included descriptions of camaraderie, shared struggle, and collective resilience, which reinforced team unity (O'Connor et al., 2015).

Symbolic identity markers were frequently mentioned, including team uniforms, logos, rallying chants, and game specific avatars or emblems. These elements function as tools for reinforcing group identity, serving both internal affirmation and external recognition within the esports scene (Bassiouni & Hackley, 2016).

Peer enforcement of behavioral norms was reported as an informal but powerful mechanism for upholding group standards. Participants noted that communication styles, punctuality, in game strategies, and interpersonal dynamics were regulated through unspoken codes and peer feedback. Violations were often met with sanctions or temporary exclusion, indicating the group's role in maintaining behavioral cohesion (Karaali & Özcan, 2023).

Role identification narratives were also deeply nuanced. Participants described themselves as occupying specific functions within their teams such as strategists, communicators, or emotional anchors. These roles extended beyond gameplay mechanics to include emotional and relational responsibilities, echoing broader societal dynamics of leadership and mutual dependence (Maheux et al., 2024).

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Triangulation of the quantitative and qualitative findings reveals a coherent narrative. Survey data empirically confirmed that group identity strength significantly predicts both in group bias and behavioral conformity. This pattern was mirrored in qualitative accounts that vividly described how emotional engagement, symbolic behaviors, and structured roles manifest these psychological affiliations in practice.

The integration of data sources enhances internal validity and contributes to a holistic understanding of how digital teams function not only as performance units but also as psychosocial communities. It is evident that in the esports communities of Bandung, identity is not merely a static label but a dynamic construct enacted through behaviors, emotions, and symbols.

In conclusion, the findings from this chapter substantiate that Bandung's esports players are profoundly shaped by their group affiliations. These affiliations dictate not only their gaming behaviors but also their social roles, emotional investments, and group perceptions. The results demonstrate that digital gaming environments serve as fertile ground for the emergence of identity driven behavior, reinforcing the broader implications of esports as spaces for collective socialization, emotional bonding, and conformity to group norms.

Comparison with Other Youth Activities

The findings from this study contribute significantly to the interdisciplinary discourse surrounding identity construction, emotional engagement, and behavioral conformity among youth in digitally mediated contexts. Bandung's esports communities exemplify how virtual spaces can replicate and even intensify the social dynamics found in traditional offline youth collectives. The in group bias identified among players in this study mirrors those found in conventional environments such as youth sports teams, school music ensembles, and student organizations. In each of these settings, emotional bonding is cultivated through shared experiences whether competitions, rehearsals, or collective goals which, in turn, reinforce team identity and loyalty (Kıymaz & Çötök, 2024).

Unlike traditional activities, esports intensify these dynamics due to daily digital interaction, creating immediate reinforcement of norms and biases. This highlights the distinct cultural texture of digital youth spaces where performance metrics and virtual hierarchies shape identity more rapidly than in offline groups (Putro & Setyawati, 2024). These digital affiliations reveal how the virtual realm offers parallel mechanisms of identity validation and boundary setting, yet with distinct cultural textures.

Theoretical Frameworks: Social Identity and Symbolic Interaction

The results strongly support social identity theory (SIT), confirming that group affiliation is a powerful predictor of conformity and decision-making. By integrating SIT with symbolic interactionism, this study shows how rituals, symbols, and repeated performances reinforce belonging in esports teams (Podjed & Peternel, 2024).

Moreover, symbolic interactionism extends these insights by explaining how identity is socially constructed through symbols, rituals, and repeated interactions. In Bandung's esports scene, participants did not just adopt the visual symbols of team identity (e.g., tags, avatars, emblems); they also engaged in performative acts team specific greetings, pre game chants, and coordinated in game strategies that served as rituals to reinforce their belonging. These symbolic performances validate group membership and enable players to perform their identities both publicly and privately, often influencing their sense of self beyond the game (Richler, 2020).

Symbolic Cues Across Digital and Physical Contexts

Symbolic cues extend the function of identity markers beyond the screen, playing a vital role in linking digital identities with physical social behaviors. Players were observed and reported to wear branded jerseys, share symbolic gestures, and modify their digital profiles with uniform team symbols all of which conveyed alignment with a particular gaming culture. These physical

manifestations of digital affiliation function similarly to how athletes might wear team uniforms or fans display merchandise creating visible indicators of shared identity (Udoudom et al., 2024).

This merging of symbolic cues across boundaries illustrates the emergence of hybrid identities those that are co constructed in both digital and offline realms. Such hybridization enhances belonging while deepening emotional investment in community norms. Players identified these cues as critical tools for building trust, recognizing fellow members, and maintaining a sense of connectedness even outside of gameplay. Furthermore, as esports fandom continues to grow, the commercial visibility of such cues suggests they are not only cultural artifacts but also socio economic symbols within youth subcultures (Rambe & Mulyadi, 2023).

Norm Enforcement and Group Dynamics

In addition to symbolic affirmation, the study found compelling evidence of peer enforced behavioral norms within teams. These informal governance structures shaped daily interactions and collective expectations. Participants described how behaviors such as showing up late to practice, ignoring team strategies, or failing to communicate effectively were met with social sanctions ranging from public critique to temporary exclusion. Such norms were internalized over time and contributed to both social regulation and team performance (Karaali & Özcan, 2023).

Interestingly, while these norms fostered cohesion and accountability, they also highlighted potential pressures to conform that may suppress individuality. A few participants acknowledged tensions between personal playstyles and team expectations, revealing the complex negotiations required to remain both autonomous and aligned. This reflects broader findings from social psychology that conformity within cohesive groups can lead to reduced dissent and innovation unless balanced with flexible group structures.

Implications for Youth Development and Education

These psychosocial mechanisms provide practical implications: esports can be leveraged in education to cultivate teamwork, resilience, and digital citizenship. Structured programs could formalize peer mentorship, promote inclusivity, and encourage ethical conduct, aligning with calls for integrating digital culture into youth development (Tedjakumala et al., 2024).

In formal education, esports clubs and digital game based learning initiatives can provide opportunities to cultivate teamwork, strategic thinking, and communication. As players assume defined roles within teams leader, supporter, strategist they practice skills applicable to academic and professional settings. Emotional experiences such as loss, victory, and collaboration foster resilience and empathy. Structured esports programs could also address themes of ethical conduct, gender inclusivity, and digital citizenship, contributing to a broader educational agenda (Chen, 2023).

Additionally, peer mentoring within esports communities presents an opportunity to harness youth leadership. Senior players or captains often take on informal mentorship roles, guiding newcomers through skill development and team integration. Formalizing these structures can enhance interpersonal learning while promoting accountability and community values (Rhue & Clark, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This study examined how group identity shapes in-group bias and behavioral conformity in Bandung's esports communities. The findings demonstrate that stronger identification with teams fosters loyalty, emotional investment, and conformity to group norms, while also reinforcing symbolic practices that bridge digital and physical spaces.

These results highlight esports as more than entertainment: they are arenas for identity formation, social learning, and youth development. For educators and policymakers, integrating esports into youth programs offers opportunities to build teamwork, resilience, and digital citizenship. Future research should explore gender dynamics, rural contexts, and longitudinal patterns to deepen understanding of how digital communities influence identity and social behavior over time.

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