

CULTURAL NORMS, SOCIAL BELONGING, AND THE FORMATION OF EVERYDAY IDENTITY

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Abstract

Every day, identity is formed through continuous interaction between individuals and the cultural and social contexts in which they live. The study examines how cultural norms and social belonging jointly influence the construction, negotiation, and expression of identity in everyday life. Although existing studies have extensively addressed social norms, belonging, and identity, these concepts are often analysed separately, limiting understanding of their interdependent effects. The study therefore develops an integrated conceptual framework that connects cultural expectations, experiences of inclusion and exclusion, individual agency, and identity outcomes. It argues that cultural norms provide socially recognised roles, values, and behavioural standards, while social belonging determines the extent to which these expectations are internalised, negotiated, resisted, or transformed. The framework further emphasises that individuals are not passive recipients of cultural influence; rather, they interpret and respond to social expectations according to their relationships, social positions, and access to alternative communities. Everyday identity is therefore understood as relational, contextual, dynamic, and shaped by both structure and agency. The study contributes to identity scholarship by positioning belonging as a mediating process between cultural norms and identity expression. It also offers practical implications for education, workplaces, migration, community development, mental health, and social policy. The framework provides a basis for future empirical research examining identity formation across culturally diverse and institutionally varied settings.

Keywords: cultural norms; social belonging; everyday identity; identity formation; individual agency

1. Introduction

Identity is not formed in isolation. It builds as a result of ongoing contacts between people and their social surroundings. All of the things that people experience in everyday life in their families, schools, jobs, religious communities, neighbourhoods, and the digital world are bound to shape people's thoughts, behaviour, communication, and their relationships with others. These expectations are ingrained in cultural norms and are accepted, valued, and approved in a specific social environment. Meanwhile, people try to connect and feel accepted and recognized in the groups they are a part of. The developing process of the creation of an everyday identification thus encompasses a dynamic interaction of cultural expectations, social belonging, personal meaning, and individual agency. Culture acts as the symbolic resource by which an individual understands himself and others. It influences what people think is proper or not, their roles in society, how they think responsibly, what they think it means to be successful, and how they relate to others. It has been proven in cultural psychology that humans' thoughts and behaviours cannot be fully explained without taking into account the cultural environments where they live and grow (Heine, 2020). More recent research has also called into question the overly abstract boundaries between cultural regions and the complexity, diversity and internal variation of cultural systems (Kitayama & Salvador, 2024). The above views indicate that identity is not the same as internal psychological ownership. Instead, it is created through culturally organised systems of meaning which shape people's interpretations of their experiences and their social roles. Reality, knowledge, and identity are socially constructed and reproduced through social interaction, institutional practices, and shared systems of interpretation (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). In this respect, the categories of identity with respect to

gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, religion, and occupation have meaning as social practices and institutional arrangements. People pick up these meanings by engaging in daily experiences and apply them to comprehend themselves and others. However, identity is not fully determined and not fully self-constructed. It is built on history and culture-specific structures that offer opportunities for roles, categories, storylines, and behavioural norms.

Identity theory also focuses on the simultaneous location of individuals within various social roles and on the meanings they give to the social roles to which they belong. These meanings go with these roles because people want to be consistent in their self-understanding and those attached to their roles (Burke, 2022). But identity is not just role-based. It is also narrative, for people structure their experience through personal and collective narratives. These stories are an interface of personal experience and cultural significance, enabling the individual to negotiate continuity in their lives as they deal with varying situations (McLean & Syed, 2016). Thus, identity formation is social and not solely personal. Group identity is another major area of identity. According to social identity theory, people identify a portion of themselves in a range of social groups and come to understand themselves by comparing themselves with other groups (Tajfel et al., 2001). Group identification can give meaning, emotional security, a common goal, and norms of behaviour. It can also establish divisions between the inside and outside. The contemporary uses of social identity theory show that group process is a determinant in attitudes, behaviour, cooperation, conflict, and self-evaluation in various social settings (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019). The processes outlined are particularly significant for the understanding of how cultural norms are personally meaningful, as group membership can

produce differential group experiences in which a particular set of norms is more likely to be encountered and a particular set of behaviours more likely to be sanctioned or rewarded. These identity processes are given emotional and relational force from belonging. Stable, meaningful interpersonal attachments have long been considered one of the basic human motives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A sense of belonging is a feeling of being accepted, valued, and recognised in a social setting. A concept has been emerging in recent years that indicates that belonging is complex, with components related to relationships, place, participation, identity, and perceptions of fit between the person and the environment (Allen et al., 2021).

People who feel a sense of belonging are likely to accept the norms of the group and to internalize the values of the group. On the contrary, exclusion or marginalisation can have the effect of leading to identity confusion, identity concealment, identity resistance, and alternative communities. Power also plays a role in being part of a group. Additionally, it is a social and political process that decides who can be counted among the legitimate members of a community (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Ethnicity, citizenship, language, class, religion, gender, and migration status may contribute to access to belonging. If a person holds more than one cultural identity, is it possible to possess more than one? If a person has more than one cultural identity, then the identity may be a multiple affiliation. The literature on immigration and identity multiplicity indicates that cultural identities can be used in combination, not in opposition to, each other (Verkuyten et al., 2019). Identities are not static and may shift and change in different contexts, but they can become problematic when social contexts provide restrictive definitions.

This division reduces knowledge of their interdependence in everyday life. This division reduces knowledge of interdependence in everyday life. Cultural norms act as expectations and identity categories, and the experience of belonging is either in acceptance, negotiation, resistance, or transformation. This interaction is the source of everyday identity. Hence, in the present theoretical work, an integrated model is presented to account for the process of identity formation, shaped by cultural norms and cultural experiences of belonging. It suggests that building and giving expression to identity happens as a process of cultural expectation, group affiliation, social recognition, meaning-making, and personal agency.

2. Theoretical Problem and Research Gap

There has been an increase in research regarding cultural norms, social belonging, and identity formation across sociology, psychology, cultural studies, and related fields. These areas are typically investigated independently, without considering them as interdependent processes. Much of the literature on social norms describes the role of social norms in influencing behaviour and ensuring cultural stability, but not necessarily how social norms are integrated into everyday life. Despite the growth of this literature, research on social norms remains conceptually fragmented, with overlapping definitions, disciplinary differences, and inconsistent explanatory frameworks (Legros & Cislighi, 2020). Another constraint is the narrow cultural scope of the current body of identity studies work. Much of the influential theory has emerged in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic contexts. Consequently, they might not sufficiently describe the process of the development of identity in culturally and socially different groups. Research by Muthukrishna et al. (2020) illustrates a significant cultural and psychological difference between societies that requires a

framework that considers cultural distance and contextual differences. Hence, the primary theoretical space for development is the lack of an integrated explanation of how cultural norms and social belonging work together in the construction of an everyday sense of self. Existing studies do not sufficiently clarify how experiences of inclusion or exclusion, recognition, and group membership will be internalized, negotiated, resisted, and transformed in response to cultural expectations. Therefore, the study aims:

- 1.To examine how cultural norms shape the formation and expression of everyday identity
- 2.To analyse the role of social belonging in influencing individuals' sense of self, group membership, and identity negotiation
- 3.To develop an integrated theoretical framework explaining how cultural norms and social belonging interact in the construction of everyday identity

3. Conceptualising Cultural Norms

Cultural norms are shared expectations that help individuals think, act, communicate, and interact in certain ways in a specific social context. They are social rules that are not formal, and they are maintained by the process of social approval and disapproval, as well as rewarding and sanctioning. Family, educational institutions, religious groups, the workplace, media, and regular interactions all play a role in making up cultural norms. They influence people's attitudes and perceptions regarding authority, responsibility, morality, relationships, appearance, and social roles. Norms can be seen as stable, but are reproduced, negotiated, and even contested by individuals and groups. Cislighi and Heise (2020) see the difference between social norms and cultural beliefs by focusing on the expectation of other people's behaviour and the approval of others' behaviour. Horne and Mollborn (2020) also define norms as 'embedded into a cohesive network comprised of values, social norms, institutions and behaviour patterns'. This view suggests that norms have an impact on individual behaviour and social norms. The dynamics of culture are also influenced by the interplay of norms, social learning, and situational interpretation, as Morris et al. (2015) point out. Thus, cultural norms cannot be treated solely as external pressures. They are also internal standards by which people measure themselves, make sense of social settings, and develop identities that are accepted as valid in specific communities.

4. Conceptualising Social Belonging

Social belonging is a sense of being accepted, valued, recognised, and connected with others in a social group or environment. It's not about attendance or formal membership. One can be a part of a community, family, church, or workplace and not feel included or respected. Belonging involves emotional connection, relationship security, belongingness, and feeling at ease in the social environment. It affects what people think about their role in the group and whether they are authorized to engage in a full social life or not. Allen (2020) proposes a multi-faceted psychological and social space of belonging that is described by relationship, location, culture, and identity. This perspective focuses on the sense of belonging as a state shaped by people's interactions with their surroundings, not just as an internal condition. Additionally, Cohen (2022) notes the significance of social cues that convey acceptance, exclusion, recognition, or rejection to the sense of belonging. Confidence, motivation, trust, and behavior can be influenced by such signals. Belonging plays a special role in identity formation, offering a sense of validation for certain forms of being and motivating

people to identify with a group's values and expectations. On the other hand, feelings of marginalisation or rejection can result in feeling alienated, hiding one's identity, resisting, or looking for alternative communities. In this way, social belonging is a pivot that links the social aspects and the development of social identity.

5. Conceptualising Everyday Identity

Everyday identity is a set of ways of understanding, expressing, and negotiating one's identity in the normal course of social life. It is communicated universally in the family, school, workplace, neighborhood, religious places, or online. Identity is not static or completely personal. It emerges from multiple interactions where people make sense of the social rules, respond to others, and alter their actions based on the context. Individuals can highlight various elements of their identity in different circumstances, such as gender role, employment status, ethnicity, religion, age, class, and/or status

as a parent or child. Goffman (2023) imagines social life as a form of performance that is, people acting to control what other people say and think about them. This view of identity is expressed using language, looks, movement, action, and role-playing. People try to make a socially credible and appropriate impression in a specific context. It is not claiming that identity is untrue but that one's identity is relational and context-specific. Audiences, norms in certain environments, and personal perceptions of self all contribute to the construction of one's everyday self. This can be conformity, adaptation, hiding, opposition, or trial. Thus, daily identity is a dynamic social construction in which each individual is in pursuit of recognition, but also experiences a sense of continuity in relation to the varying situations. Table 1 defines the core concepts in identity formation. It illustrates the mechanisms through which cultural norms, social belonging, individual agency, social context, and identity come together and interact in specific ways as they shape the construction, expression, negotiation, and transformation of identity.

Table 1. Core Concepts in Everyday Identity Formation

Core concept	Working definition	Main mechanisms	Influence on everyday identity
Cultural norms	Shared expectations concerning acceptable behaviour, values, roles, and social conduct within a cultural setting	Socialisation, approval, sanctions, institutional expectations, observation, and repetition	Define legitimate roles, behaviours, moral standards, and forms of self-presentation.
Social belonging	The experience of being accepted, recognised, valued, and connected within a group or social environment	Inclusion, participation, recognition, relational security, group membership, and social support	Validates identity, strengthens group identification, and encourages internalisation of shared values.
Everyday identity	The context-dependent understanding and presentation of the self through routine social interaction	Role performance, self-interpretation, social comparison, narrative construction, and impression management	Produces stable, flexible, hybrid, concealed, contested, or transformed identities
Individual agency	The capacity to interpret, negotiate, modify, accept, or resist cultural expectations	Reflection, adaptation, selective conformity, resistance, reinterpretation, and identity experimentation	Prevents identity from being completely determined by cultural structure or group expectations

Social context	The immediate institutional, relational, and cultural environment in which identity is expressed	Family interaction, education, work, religion, community participation, and digital communication	Determines which identity dimensions become visible, rewarded, restricted, or contested
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6. Relevant Theoretical Perspectives

Several theories underpin the possible understanding of the relationship between cultural norms and social belonging to everyday identity. Multiple theories can be used to understand the relationship between cultural norms and social belonging in everyday identity. Social identity theory is a social psychological approach to the idea that people have a self-image that is partly based on their group membership. Group membership affects people's self-categorization, assessment of others, and group norms in terms of values and behaviours (Tajfel et al., 2001). In addition, social identity processes influence members' conformity, cooperation, exclusion, and intergroup relationships, as displayed by Scheepers and Ellemers (2019), lending the theory utility in explaining how belonging reinforces the group-based identity. There is an additional layer that is the cultural self. Markus and Kitayama (1991) suggest that a culturally influenced sense of independence and interdependence affects selfhood. The viewpoint here also shows that the process of identity

development is not uniform but depends on the cultural context, requiring more than an assumption. Intersectionality also enriches the analysis because of its ability to illustrate how identity is created as a result of multiple social positions: gender, race, class, religion, and ethnicity. While these categories act in isolation, it should be remembered that they interact to form specific experiences of privilege and marginalisation (Crenshaw, 2013). Building on this view, Collins et al. (2021) view intersectionality as a key social lens through which to explore power, inequality, and life experience. All of these theories account for a group-based, culturally organized, relational, and multiple systems of social difference approach to identity. The main theories that have served as foundations for the proposed framework have been summarised in Table 2. It explains how each leads to an understanding of cultural norms, social identification, and everyday identity construction. The table highlights the assumptions and analyses made in each theory and how this helps to provide a multi-faceted understanding of identity, which is contextual, relational, and negotiated.

Table 2. Theoretical Perspectives Supporting the Framework

Theoretical perspective	Central idea	Relevance to cultural norms	Relevance to social belonging	Contribution to everyday identity
Social Identity Theory	Individuals define part of themselves through membership in social groups	Group norms establish expected attitudes and behaviours	Belonging strengthens identification with the in-group	Explains how group membership shapes self-concept and identity expression
Cultural Self Theory	Selfhood is shaped by culturally specific models of independence and interdependence.	Cultural values influence acceptable forms of autonomy and relationality	Belonging is experienced differently across cultural settings	Explains cross-cultural variation in identity formation
Social Constructionism	Identity and social reality are produced through interaction and shared meaning.	Norms are created and maintained through institutions and everyday practices.	Recognition by others gives social legitimacy to identity	Explains identity as relational, negotiated, and historically situated
Identity Theory	Individuals attach meanings to the	Norms define role	Belonging confirms role	Explains how role identities guide

	social roles they occupy	expectations and standards of conduct	legitimacy and continuity	behaviour across contexts
Intersectionality	Multiple social positions interact to shape privilege and marginalisation	Norms differ according to gender, class, ethnicity, religion, and other positions	Belonging may be unequal or conditional across groups	Explains complex and unequal identity experiences
Dramaturgical Perspective	Individuals manage impressions through social performance	Norms influence what forms of self-presentation are acceptable	Audience recognition affects the credibility of identity performances	Explains how identity is presented and adjusted in everyday settings
Narrative Identity Perspective	Individuals construct identity through personal and collective stories	Cultural narratives provide available identity meanings	Belonging connects personal stories to group histories and shared memories	Explains identity continuity, reinterpretation, and transformation

Note. The perspectives are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Together, they explain identity as culturally structured, socially recognised, context-dependent, and actively negotiated.

7. Cultural Norms and Everyday Identity Formation

Cultural norms affect one's everyday identity by providing guidelines for appropriate behavior, roles, values, and ways of presenting that are appropriate to a social group. People experience these expectations in their families, schools, jobs, through the media, and in the community. These expectations turn into standards over time, by which they evaluate themselves and understand how they are being seen by others. Identity formation, however, does not only require personal decision, but it also demands adaptation to cultural norms that deem an identity legitimate. Ellemers and van Nunspeet (2020) demonstrate that social categorisation and conformity influence moral behavior in the day-to-day, indicating that people tend to monitor their own behavior in line with group expectations. This influence differs in different cultures. Gelfand et al. (2011) identify two types of cultures – tight cultures, where norms are high and deviation is heavily sanctioned, and loose cultures, where it is low. The modes of identity expression might be more tightly controlled in tight settings and be more loosely controlled in loose settings. Gelfand et al. (2021) also showed that culture can affect collective response to social crises to a great degree. These results suggest that cultural norms influence identity through them facilitating the reinforcement of conforming behaviour, through their opposition to non-conforming behaviour, and through the creation of culturally sanctioned models of what it means to be. Norms can also be re-interpreted or rejected by individuals, particularly when group norms and values are at

odds.

8. Social Belonging and Identity Formation

Social belonging is one of how individuals can develop their identity, through a sense of feeling recognised, emotionally secure, and legitimated as being part of a group. Acceptance enables people to connect with the values, expectations, and practices they are a part of. Belonging helps maintain identity continuity as it is affirmed that a person's sense of self is accepted by others. Brady et al (2020) provide evidence that the improvement of social belonging is not only short-term but also has long-term impacts for underrepresented students, highlighting that the sense of belonging has a positive effect on confidence, participation, and future self-perception. Similarly, Haslam et al. (2022) assert that social identity provides a meaningful group-based connection and provides a way to help alleviate loneliness and promote psychological well-being. The processes demonstrate how relationships that convey inclusion and shared belonging contribute to the development of identity. The practical significance of institutional recognition is highlighted by the fact that belonging interventions specifically tailored for students of low socioeconomic position led to higher retention rates (Murphy et al., 2020). On the other hand, exclusion has the potential to undermine group identification and social status. It can also lead to people enacting behaviours that involve hiding parts of themselves, challenging dominant norms, or looking for alternative communities. Social belonging should be seen

as both an emotional experience and a social process in which identities are affirmed, sustained, or changed.

9. Proposed Theoretical Framework

The proposed framework describes everyday identity as a product of interactions between cultural norms, social belonging, and individual agency. The cultural context sets the values, behavioural expectations, definitions of roles, and standards of acceptable conduct. These norms determine the identity options of an individual, but what effect they have depends on the inclusion, recognition, or exclusion of an individual within relevant social groups. Belonging serves as a mediator and translates the expectations of others into internalisation, negotiation, resistance, or rejection. Exposure to a new cultural environment does not necessarily lead to

successful adaptation (Bierwaczek and Kunst, 2021), showing that identity development requires more than passive exposure to a culture. Social acceptance, relational support, and contextual conditions are also important. The influence of the group also plays an important role in this process. Shared social identities can help leaders and group members establish group values and shape group behaviour (Haslam et al., 2020). The framework takes the form of cultural norms, belonging experience, identity interpretation, identity negotiation, and day-to-day identity expression, based on these insights. Throughout the process, there is individual agency – each person may accept, change, incorporate, or reject cultural expectations. Its identity can be stable, conflicted, hybrid, hidden, or transformed, depending on the social context and the nature of the experience of belonging.

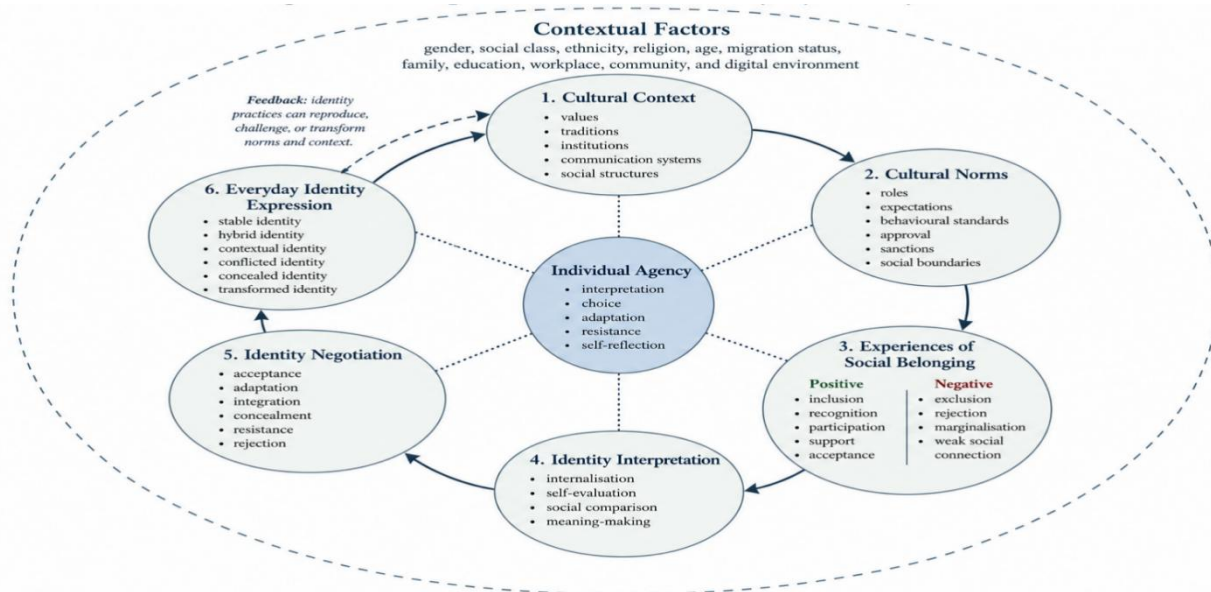


Figure 1: Integrated Conceptual Framework of Everyday Identity Formation

This framework, shown in Figure 1, is an illustration of how identity formation takes place throughout the day, within a cultural context, culturally mediated norms, experiences of social belonging, identity interpretation, and identity negotiation. Values, traditions, institutions, communication systems, and social structures are found in a cultural context, and they create expectations of acceptable identities and behaviours. Such cultural norms shape the significance that others attach to a person's sense of being included, recognized, included and participating, excluded, or marginalized in a social group. How people interpret and negotiate their identity is then shaped by belonging experiences. Identity interpretation includes internalisation, self-evaluation, social comparison, and meaning-making, and identity negotiation comprises acceptance, adaptation, concealment, resistance, and rejection. These processes create various forms of everyday expression of identity, such as stable identity, hybrid identity, contextualized identity, conflicted identity, concealed identity, and transformed identity. The concept of individual agency is introduced in the centre of the framework as interpretation, choice, adaptation, resistance, and self-reflection have an impact on each phase of the identity formation process. The feedback loop is a way of pointing out that these daily forms of identity may replicate, subvert, or modify cultural norms and social contexts, thus showing how they can be seen as reproducing, challenging, or changing. Multiple factors surrounding it, such as gender, social class, ethnicity, religion, age, migration status, family, education, workplace, community, and digital environments, affect and

influence the lived experience of norms, belonging, and identity.

10. Theoretical Contributions

This study makes several theoretical contributions as it brings together cultural norms, social belonging, and everyday identity into one conceptual framework. Current theories tend to focus on one or the other of these concepts, rather than on both of them, so that they do not understand how they work in the common social life. The flexible framework presented in this document tries to fill this space by clarifying how to interpret identity via cultural norms and how social belonging might facilitate, negotiate, resist, or transform them. The process of belonging, therefore, serves as a mediator between culture and identity. A second contribution is to the inclusion of individual agency. Rather than passive receivers of cultural expectations, the framework treats people. Rather, it acknowledges that people understand and adapt, modify and ignore, or refuse norms based on their experiences, social status, and communities of choice. This enables the model to account for conformity and resistance. A third contribution is that it moves beyond focusing on variability across contexts to also focus on variability within contexts. An individual's everyday identity can manifest in various ways in family, school, place of employment, religious settings, one's neighbourhood, and digital contexts. Thus, the framework takes a relational, dynamic, and situational perspective of identity as opposed to a fixed approach.

11. Practical Implications

Institutions shape identity both formally, in terms of rules, and informally, in terms of cues to accept, acknowledge, exclude, and engage in. School and university communities can further help students develop their identities in settings where they can feel that they are cared for and can participate without ignoring significant parts of themselves. Likewise, cultural differences can be acknowledged, practices decreased, and opportunities for meaningful involvement and progression can be provided to employees in workplaces in order to strengthen inclusion. The framework also applies to migration and integration in the community. Policies with a narrow focus on conformity to dominant norms can have a detrimental impact on fostering a sense of belonging. To be integrated, it is necessary to both participate in shared institutions and to recognize cultural identity. Community organisations can foster progress in this by facilitating environments in which people build the possibility for relationships to cross social lines and keep important cultural ties. Psychologists and social workers in the field of mental health and social services need to be able to think about the impact of exclusion, cultural conflict, and a poor sense of belonging on the security of identity and well-being. Thus, both levels of individual coping and the broader socio-factors which contribute to marginalisation should be addressed in interventions.

12. Conclusion

The study discussed the relation between cultural norms and social belonging and how they work together to constitute the construction of an everyday identity. It rejects the notion that identity is only a self-created or self-experienced phenomenon. Rather, it emerges within contexts of society where norms, values, and roles about acceptable behaviors are held. The way in which people are expected to present themselves, behave, and interact with others is determined by cultural norms, which also determine the content of identity. These expectations, in turn, are shaped by social belonging. The proposed framework situates belonging between the cultural structure and the expression of identity. Experiences with recognition, inclusion, exclusion, and group membership shape understandings of cultural expectations and positioning in social life. On the other hand, individual agency can also permit people to reinterpret, combine, challenge, and reject mainstream norms. This is why there can be stability as well as conflict, concealment, hybridity, and transformation as far as everyday identity is concerned. This article thus brings a relational, situational, and dynamic perspective to the concept of identity. Its most important contribution is the synthesis of cultural norms, sense of belonging, and agency into a single theoretical explanation. This framework can help future empirical studies in educational, work, community, migration, and digital contexts and fully inclusive practices and policies that account for cultural differences and meaningful participation.

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