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Contemporary Social Identities in a Platform Society: Fragmentation, Mediation and the Search for Belonging

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Abstract

Social identity has become one of the most consequential and least stable concepts in contemporary social science. This article asks how collective identities are formed, maintained and contested in a period characterised by declining national attachment among younger cohorts, intensifying partisan and cultural sorting, super-diverse urban populations, and the algorithmic mediation of self-presentation. It reports a comparative secondary analysis that synthesises evidence from seventeen survey programmes, four qualitative studies of digital identity and two recent psychometric investigations of affective polarisation. The findings identify four movements. First, the intensity of national identification has weakened sharply in the United States - from roughly ninety per cent of adults reporting high pride in the early 2000s to fifty-eight per cent in 2025 - with the decline concentrated among younger cohorts and among political minorities within the national community. Second, identities are increasingly sorted, so that national, partisan, cultural and platform affiliations align and reinforce one another. Third, algorithmic curation has become an active participant in identity formation, converting externally suggested categories into internal self-descriptions. Fourth, measurement practice lags behind these changes: instruments developed for an era of stable national categories capture only part of what identity now does. The article proposes a six-fold typology of contemporary identity configurations and argues that the central policy question is no longer which identity people hold but whether the institutional ecology allows multiple identities to coexist without producing threat.

Keywords: social identity, collective identity, national identity, intersectionality, affective polarisation, digital identity, algorithmic mediation, social cohesion, generations

1. Introduction

Identity has moved from the margins of social theory to the centre of public argument. A decade and a half ago, debates about nationalism, ethnicity and religion occupied specialists; today they structure electoral competition, campus conflict, migration policy and the architecture of the platforms on which most people now encounter one another. The shift is not merely rhetorical. Social identity - the part of a person's self-concept that derives from perceived membership of social groups - has long been understood as a source of self-esteem, belonging and collective action (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). What has changed is the environment in which that mechanism operates: the groups available for identification have multiplied, the boundaries between them have become contestable, and the infrastructures that make a group visible to its members are now engineered by private platforms optimising for engagement.

Three empirical developments motivate this article. The first is the measurable weakening of national attachment in several advanced democracies. In the United States, the share of adults describing themselves as extremely or very proud to be American has fallen from roughly ninety per cent in the years after the September 2001 attacks to fifty-eight per cent in 2025, the lowest level recorded in a quarter century of measurement (Gallup, 2025). Comparable softening appears in self-described patriotism: thirty-one per cent of Americans called themselves very patriotic in mid-2025, down from thirty-nine per cent a year earlier (YouGov, 2025). These are not declines in participation so much as declines in the affective intensity of a national self-description.

The second development is sorting. Identities that were once cross-cutting now align: a person's party, faith, media diet, residential geography and platform of choice increasingly predict one another, so that any single affiliation carries a larger bundle of social meaning. When asked about pride in 2025, ninety-two per cent of Republicans but only thirty-six per cent of Democrats reported high levels (Gallup, 2025); the same pattern

appears in the near-complete absence of overlap between partisan groups in trusted news sources (Pew Research Center, 2025). Sorting converts disagreement about policy into disagreement about who 'we' are, which is a different and more corrosive phenomenon.

The third development is mediation. Identity work - the everyday labour of presenting, testing and revising a self - increasingly takes place inside systems that sort audiences, rank visibility and recommend affiliations. Qualitative research with young people in Jordan finds that algorithms reward particular linguistic and aesthetic presentations while rendering others invisible, reproducing class, gender and geographic inequalities through apparently neutral technical mechanisms (Alkhazaleh et al., 2025). Studies of immigrant creators on TikTok describe 'transbordered algorithmic identities' in which belonging is assembled across borders through what the platform recommends and whom it connects (Watson et al., 2025). The theoretical implication is significant: if curation participates in identity formation, then identity cannot be treated as a purely internal achievement.

This article makes four contributions. It integrates four literatures that rarely speak to one another - social identity theory, intersectionality, late-modern theories of the self, and platform and surveillance studies - into a single layered model (Figure 1). It reports a comparative secondary analysis of contemporary evidence on identity intensity, sorting and mediation. It proposes a six-fold typology of identity configurations. And it argues that the prevailing measurement apparatus, built for an era of stable national categories, systematically misreads what identity now does.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 describes the design of the comparative secondary analysis. Section 4 presents findings. Section 5 discusses their theoretical and practical implications, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Identity Theory and Its Descendants

The modern study of identity begins with the proposition that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group membership and are motivated to evaluate their own groups favourably (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Self-categorisation theory extended this insight by specifying the conditions under which a particular membership becomes salient: categorisation is context-dependent, and the activation of a social identity depersonalises perception in the direction of the group prototype (Turner et al., 1987). Uncertainty-reduction formulations add that people gravitate towards groups that offer clear, consensual definitions of belief and behaviour, which helps explain the appeal of identities with sharp boundaries in periods of rapid change (Hogg & Williams, 2000). Identity theory in the symbolic interactionist tradition complements this by insisting that identities are organised in a salience hierarchy within the person and that commitment to a role shapes behaviour (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Together these traditions establish the core mechanism used throughout this article: identity is relational, situational and evaluative.

Two limitations of this classical apparatus matter for the present argument. First, it was developed in an environment in which the relevant groups were relatively few, relatively stable and largely given by birth, nation, workplace or congregation. Second, it treats the content of a category as exogenous. Both assumptions are increasingly untenable.

2.2 From Given to Chosen: Late-Modern, Liquid and Networked Selves

A second tradition argues that identity has become a project rather than an inheritance. In late modernity, Giddens (1991) argued, self-identity is a reflexively organised endeavour: individuals must continually construct, maintain and revise a coherent narrative against a background of abstract systems and expert knowledge. Bauman (2000) pushed the argument further, describing a 'liquid' phase of modernity in which the melting of solid social forms makes identity a perpetual task rather than a settled achievement. Castells (2010), writing at the moment the internet became mass, reframed identity as the process by which social actors construct meaning through cultural attributes arranged in a hierarchy of salience, distinguishing legitimising, resistance and project identities. Narrative psychology supplies the individual-level counterpart: identity is an internalised and evolving life story that integrates the reconstructed past, perceived present and anticipated future (McAdams, 2001). The classical psychosocial formulation had already located the decisive moment of identity consolidation in adolescence, when the question of who one is becomes an explicit developmental task rather than a background assumption (Erikson, 1968); what late-modern theory adds is that the task no longer concludes.

This tradition captures something the classical one misses - the sheer labour of contemporary self-construction - but its early formulations underestimated two things: the persistence of ascriptive bonds, and the extent to which the resources for self-construction are now supplied by institutions with their own commercial logic.

2.3 Intersectionality and Superdiversity

A third literature insists that identities are never singular. Crenshaw's (1989) formulation of intersectionality argued that the experience of Black women could not be understood as the sum of race and gender discrimination, because the categories themselves are mutually constituted in structures of power. Stuart Hall (1996) made the parallel point at the level of theory: identities are 'points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us', never a finished essence. Vertovec (2007) described the empirical condition of 'super-diversity', in which migration has multiplied the variables - legal status, generation, language, religion, education - that differentiate populations within any single category. Amartya Sen (2006) warned of the violence that follows when plural affiliations are reduced to a single overriding one by what he called the illusion of destiny. Appiah (2018) extended the critique to the liberal vocabulary of identity itself, arguing that most of the labels treated as natural are 'lies that bind': contingent, historically recent, and far less prescriptive than believed.

The strength of this literature is its insistence on multiplicity and power. Its weakness, for empirical purposes, has been methodological: intersectionality has been easier to assert normatively than to operationalise at scale, and quantitative practice has often defaulted to additive models that miss interaction (Section 5.4 returns to this).

2.4 Identity in the Platform Society

A fourth literature addresses the infrastructures through which identity is now performed. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical account of impression management anticipated much of what platform research now documents, but the stage has changed: performances are recorded, quantified, ranked and redistributed by systems whose criteria are commercial rather than social. Critical data studies describe how extraction and classification reorganise human life around data relations (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), while work on search and recommendation shows that automated classification can encode and amplify social hierarchies (Noble, 2018).

Empirical research on digital identity has moved quickly in the last two years. Interview-based work on Jordanian youth found that digital identities are assembled under 'invisible algorithms' that reward some patterns of expression and suppress others, so that young people adjust language, appearance and lifestyle to the perceived logic of the system - a dynamic the authors read through Foucault's panopticism, Bourdieu's symbolic capital, and digital sociology (Alkhazaleh et al., 2025). A study of one hundred TikTok posts by African and Asian immigrant creators theorises 'transbordered algorithmic identities': belonging built across identity and geography with, and against, the recommendations of the platform (Watson et al., 2025). Analysis of a virtual influencer's sponsored posts shows how authenticity is produced through the interaction of semiotic resources, chronotopic framing and algorithmic visibility (Elyamany, 2025). And a survey of one hundred and fifty late-adolescent students found that higher algorithmic exposure was associated with greater social comparison and appearance pressure, with content diversity operating as a protective factor (Sajipratha, 2025). Haidt (2024) provides the most widely discussed synthesis of the generational consequences, arguing that the replacement of play-based childhoods by phone-based ones has restructured adolescent identity formation itself.

What unites these studies is a claim about agency: identity is no longer authored solely by the person or bestowed solely by the community, but co-produced with systems that have interests of their own. Figure 1 represents this as a layered model in which sources of identity content are converted by mediating processes into social outcomes, with a recursive loop returning performed identities to the pool of available self-descriptions.

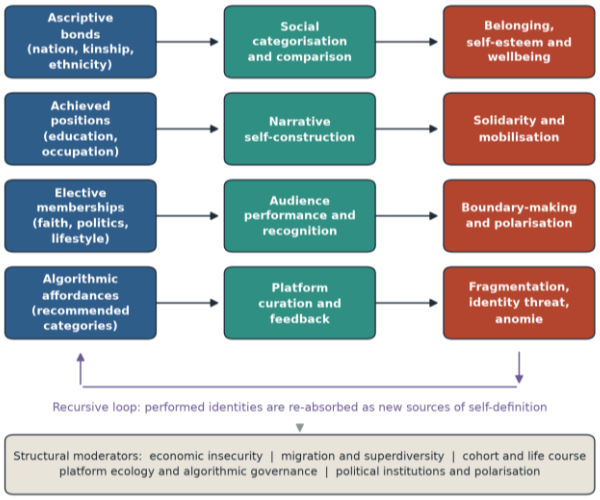


Figure 1. A layered model o contemporary identity: sources, mediation and social outcomes

2.5 Identity, Threat and Polarisation

The fifth literature connects identity to conflict. Fukuyama (2018) argued that the demand for recognition - not economic interest - is the master concept of contemporary politics, and that the perceived withholding of dignity from a group produces the politics of resentment. Norris and Inglehart (2019) documented the cultural backlash that follows when once-dominant groups experience their status as threatened. Affective polarisation - the tendency to dislike and distrust out-group partisans rather than merely disagree with them - is the most intensively measured of these phenomena (Iyengar et al., 2012).

Recent measurement work is directly relevant. McMurtrie and colleagues (2024) developed and validated a fifteen-item Affective Polarization Scale with a three-factor structure - social distance, aversion and incivility - demonstrating excellent internal consistency (alpha from .90 to .96 across factors) and expected associations with authoritarianism, identity strength and need for closure. A longitudinal study using random-intercept cross-lagged panel models found that social identity threat predicted subsequent increases in affective polarisation, and that stress predicted polarisation, whereas the reverse paths to wellbeing were not supported once within-person variance was separated from between-person differences (McMurtrie, 2025). Kiesel and Amlani (2025) introduced an open-ended, respondent-coded measure of partisan affect that recovers both the intensity and the motivational content of evaluations, addressing the long-standing limitation that closed scales measure how much people dislike opponents but not why. Work on social sorting, meanwhile, suggests that the alignment of multiple identities with partisanship is empirically real but that its growth over time is more modest than commonly assumed, and that perceived sorting may matter as much as actual sorting (Bergeron-Boutin, 2024).

2.6 Identities, Institutions and the State

A final strand reminds us that identities are not produced only from below. National communities are imagined into being by print capitalism, standardised education, censuses and maps (Anderson, 1983), and the state retains a privileged capacity to decide which distinctions count - in law, in official statistics and in the curriculum. Bourdieu's (1984) analysis of distinction supplies the complementary mechanism at the level of class: tastes and classifications are not merely expressive but constitutive, marking boundaries that are experienced as natural. Bringing the two together, the categories through which people describe themselves are neither purely chosen nor purely imposed: they are the residue of long institutional work - census categories, school curricula, media systems, administrative classifications - that has sedimented into common sense.

This matters for the argument of the present article for one specific reason. If the authoritative allocator of categories has historically been the state, then the partial transfer of that function to platforms is not a technical curiosity but a constitutional one. The systems that now decide which identities are visible, recommendable and legible are private, optimised for a commercial objective, and not accountable to the populations they classify.

The literature on data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) and on algorithmic oppression (Noble, 2018) documents the consequences at the level of extraction and classification; the identity literature has been slower to register that the classificatory function itself has changed hands. One aim of the empirical sections that follow is to document that shift in concrete settings.

2.7 Synthesis and Gaps

Four gaps emerge from this review. First, the literatures are fragmented: identity theory rarely engages platform studies, and polarisation research rarely engages intersectionality. Second, most empirical work remains single-country, and heavily North American. Third, the field lacks a vocabulary for describing configurations of identity - how multiple affiliations are arranged - as opposed to individual identities considered one at a time. Fourth, measurement practice has not kept pace: the standard instruments assume stable, mutually exclusive, nationally bounded categories. The study reported below is designed to address the first, third and fourth gaps within the limits of a secondary analysis; the second gap is acknowledged as a constraint.

3. Method

3.1 Design

The study is a comparative secondary analysis with an embedded qualitative synthesis. Because no single dataset contains measures of identity intensity, identity sorting and identity mediation across comparable populations, a secondary design was selected in preference to either a single-country survey or a purely narrative review. The design has three components: (a) a temporal analysis of repeated cross-sectional indicators of the intensity of collective identification; (b) a decomposition of those indicators by cohort and political affiliation; and (c) a thematic synthesis of primary studies of digital and algorithmic identity. The three components are triangulated against each other in Section 4.7.

The design is explanatory rather than confirmatory. It does not test a set of pre-registered hypotheses, and none of the reported associations should be read as causal estimates. The purpose is to establish whether patterns observed in one domain (declining national attachment) are consistent with patterns observed in another (digital mediation, affective polarisation), and to specify the conditions under which they should be expected to co-occur.

3.2 Data Sources and Eligibility

Sources were eligible if they (i) reported original empirical data on collective or social identity; (ii) were published in 2018 or later, with priority to 2023-2026; (iii) reported sample size and instrument wording or a citable methodology; and (iv) were available in English. Three streams were searched: (a) commercial and public opinion survey programmes with repeated identity items; (b) the academic literature on digital, algorithmic and platform identity; and (c) psychometric work on identity strength and polarisation. Twenty-three sources met the criteria, of which seventeen are reported in the tables below; the remainder are cited in the text as supporting evidence.

Table 1 describes the principal sources. Two features of the corpus shape the interpretation. First, the quantitative time series are overwhelmingly American; the Gallup pride series is the only long-run, consistently worded indicator of the intensity of national identification available for any large country. Second, the qualitative stream is deliberately non-Western in emphasis - Jordan, TikTok creators in the United States, a Sri Lankan student sample - which counterbalances that concentration but limits generalisation in the opposite direction.

Table 1. Principal data sources

Source	Year(s)	Sample / scope	Identity indicators	Role in analysis
Gallup	2001-2025	Repeated cross-sections of US adults (n ≈ 1,000 per wave)	Extremely / very proud to be American; breakdowns by generation and party	Temporal and decomposition analysis (Sect. 4.1-4.3)
YouGov	2024-2025	US adults (n ≈ 1,300 per wave)	Patriotism and pride items; intensity measures by age	Convergent validation of the declining-intensity finding
Pew Research Center	2025	US adults (n ≈ 5,000)	Platform use by age and party; trusted news sources by party	Platform ecology and sorting (Sect. 4.4)
More in Common	2024	US adults, generational comparison	Attitudes to the post-2001 period and to patriotism	Generational interpretation
Reuters Institute	2025	Digital News Report, multiple countries	News repertoires and platform dependence	Cross-national context for sorting
Arab Barometer	2023-2025	Nationally representative surveys in eight countries (Wave VIII)	Priorities, satisfaction, political attitudes, education	Non-Western comparison (Sect. 5.3)
Alkhazaleh et al.	2025	25 semi-structured interviews, Jordan (Amman, Irbid, Karak)	Digital self-presentation under algorithmic surveillance	Qualitative synthesis (Sect. 4.5)
Watson et al.	2025	100 TikTok posts by African and Asian immigrant creators	Transbordered algorithmic identities	Qualitative synthesis (Sect. 4.5)
Elyamany	2025	35 sponsored Instagram posts by one virtual influencer	Chronotopic and semiotic construction of authenticity	Qualitative synthesis (Sect. 4.5)
Sajipratha	2025	150 students aged 18-19, Sri Lanka	Algorithmic exposure; stereotyped content; identity pressure	Quantitative support for the mediation mechanism
McMurtrie et al.	2024	Scale development, three studies, US adults	15-item Affective Polarization Scale	Measurement review (Sect. 4.6)
McMurtrie	2025	Three-month longitudinal panel, US adults, pre-2024 election	Identity threat, polarisation, stress, support, health	Evidence on direction of effects
Kiesel & Amlani	2025	US partisans; survey experiment	Open-ended, self-coded partisan affect	Measurement review (Sect. 4.6)
Bergeron-Boutin	2024	American National Election Studies time series	Social sorting and affective polarisation	Sorting evidence (Sect. 4.3)

Note: sample sizes are as reported by each source; where original reports give ranges rather than exact figures, the approximate value is indicated.

3.3 Constructs and Operationalisation

Four constructs are used throughout. Identity intensity refers to the affective strength of an identification rather than its mere presence; it is operationalised through graded response options such as 'extremely', 'very' or 'not very' proud, and through separate items on patriotism. Identity salience refers to the relative standing of one identification among the several a person holds. Identity sorting refers to the degree to which two or more identifications - national, partisan, religious, cultural - co-vary across individuals, such that knowing one predicts

the others. Identity mediation refers to the extent to which identification is produced or modified through intermediary systems, principally algorithmic platforms, rather than through face-to-face interaction with community members.

Table 2 sets out the operational definitions, the indicator used and the known limitations of each. Two measurement cautions should be stated at the outset. First, survey items on national pride are sensitive to question context and to salient events, so short-run movement should not be over-interpreted. Second, cross-national comparison of identity items is compromised by differences in translation and in what the category 'nation' denotes; the analysis therefore treats the American series as a within-country trend and uses other sources for breadth rather than for exact comparison.

Table 2. Constructs, operationalisation and known limitations

Construct	Operational definition	Principal indicator(s)	Known limitations
Identity intensity	Affective strength of an identification	Graded pride and patriotism items (Gallup; YouGov)	Event-sensitive; wording changes across programmes
Identity salience	Relative standing of one identity among several held	Ranked or open-ended affiliation questions	Rarely asked consistently; usually inferred
Identity sorting	Covariation of two or more identifications	Cross-tabulations and alignment indices (ANES)	Distinction between actual and perceived sorting often blurred
Identity threat	Anticipated or experienced devaluation of a valued identity	Longitudinal scales (McMurtrie, 2025)	Correlational in most designs; direction of effect contested
Affective polarisation	Aversion towards a political out-group	15-item APS; feeling thermometers; open-ended coding	Scale proliferation; inconsistent measurement
Algorithmic mediation	Degree to which identity content is supplied by curation	Qualitative coding of narratives; exposure indices	Platform data inaccessible to researchers

3.4 Analytic Procedures

Three procedures were applied. For the temporal analysis, published marginals from repeated cross-sections were assembled into a single series and plotted, with attention to whether the item wording was stable across waves. Only identically or near-identically worded items were combined; where a series changed, the break is noted in the figure caption rather than smoothed. For the decomposition analysis, published subgroup marginals - by cohort and by partisan identification - were compared as differences in percentage points, and the ratio between the highest and lowest group was used as a simple measure of dispersion. Because subgroup estimates from different sources use different frames and modes, no attempt was made to pool them into a single statistical model; differences are reported descriptively and their robustness is assessed by convergence across independent programmes.

For the qualitative synthesis, the four digital-identity studies were coded thematically using a template derived from the layered model in Figure 1: sources of identity content; mediating processes; reported outcomes; and structural moderators. Codes were applied to published findings and illustrative quotations rather than to raw transcripts, which is a recognised limitation of synthesis-level coding. The purpose of the exercise is not to produce a pooled estimate but to establish whether the same mechanism - externally supplied categories becoming internal self-descriptions - is independently observable in settings as different as Jordan, a Sri Lankan classroom, immigrant TikTok production and a virtual influencer's feed.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Limitations

Four limits should be stated plainly. The evidentiary base is uneven: the quantitative trend evidence is concentrated in the United States, while the qualitative evidence is concentrated in the Global South. The analysis relies on published marginals rather than unit-record data, so no multivariate controls are possible. The qualitative component synthesises reported findings rather than primary data, which risks reproducing authors'

framings. And the fast-moving platform literature may date quickly: the affordances documented in 2025 studies may already have changed. These limits are revisited in the Discussion and Conclusions.

4. Findings

4.1 The Erosion of National Identification

The clearest quantitative finding is a sustained decline in the intensity of national identification in the United States. Figure 2 plots the Gallup series from 2001 to 2025. In January 2001, eighty-seven per cent of adults said they were extremely or very proud to be American; following the September 2001 attacks the figure reached about ninety per cent and remained near that level through 2004. It stood at roughly eighty per cent in 2006, fell to about seventy-five per cent in 2017 and again in 2020, and in 2025 fell to fifty-eight per cent - the first observation below sixty per cent in the quarter century of the series (Gallup, 2025).

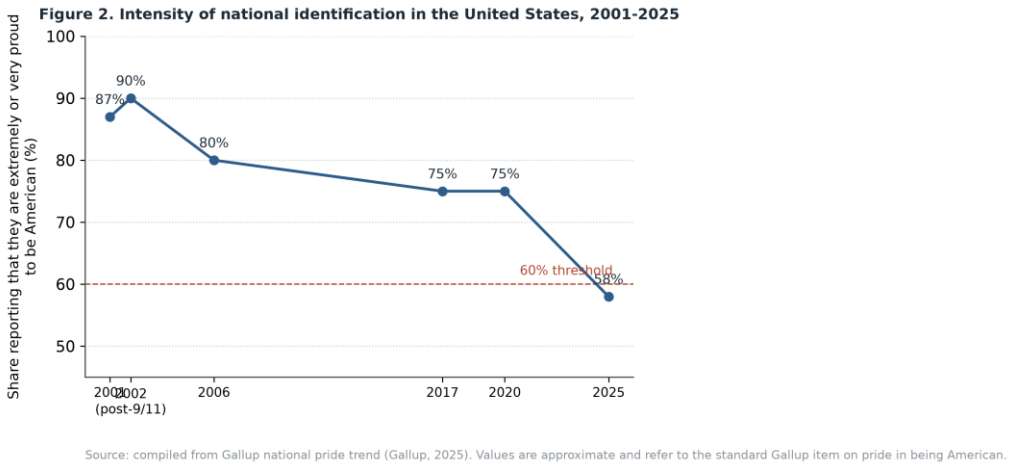


Figure 2. Intensity of national identification in the United States, 2001-2025

Two convergent sources support the interpretation that this is a real change in the intensity of attachment and not an artefact of a single item. A YouGov survey conducted in June 2025 found that sixty-eight per cent of Americans said they were proud to be American, down from eighty-three per cent a year earlier, and that the share describing themselves as very patriotic fell from thirty-nine to thirty-one per cent over the same period (YouGov, 2025). A generational study published in 2024 found that majorities of older Americans described the post-2001 period as patriotic and united, whereas fewer than half of millennials and members of Generation Z agreed (More in Common, 2024). The direction of travel is consistent across three independent programmes using different question wordings.

Two caveats qualify the finding. Attitude towards one's country and attitude towards one's compatriots are separable: in the same 2025 survey, half of respondents chose a negative term to describe 'most Americans today', a marked deterioration in horizontal trust accompanying the decline in vertical attachment (YouGov, 2025). And the decline is not uniform across all national contexts; Arab Barometer data, discussed below, show publics whose dissatisfaction with institutions coexists with strong and stable national attachments.

4.2 A Generational Gradient

The decline is strongly structured by cohort. In 2025, eighty-three per cent of the Silent Generation reported being extremely or very proud to be American, compared with seventy-five per cent of Baby Boomers, seventy-one per cent of Generation X, fifty-eight per cent of millennials and forty-one per cent of Generation Z (Gallup, 2025). The YouGov data sharpen the pattern by using the stricter 'very patriotic' measure: sixteen per cent of adults under thirty described themselves that way against fifty-three per cent of those aged sixty-five and over (YouGov, 2025). Figure 3, panel (a), displays the cohort gradient.

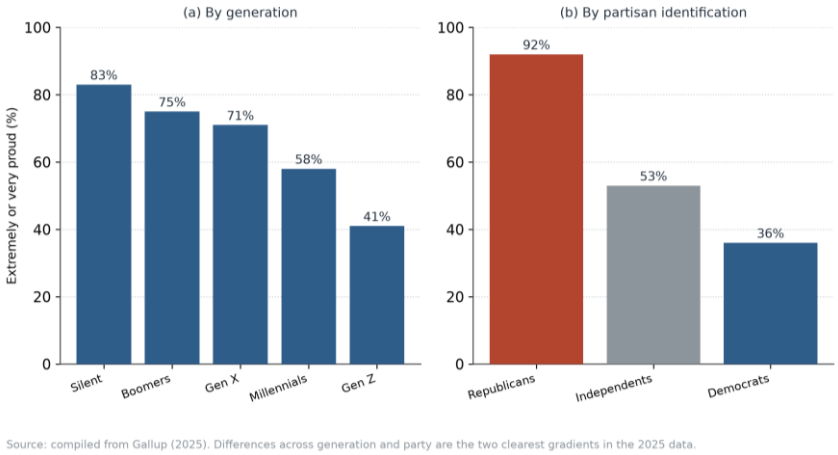


Figure 3. National pride by generation and partisan identity, 2025

Three interpretations are consistent with the data, and the design cannot adjudicate between them. A life-cycle account would predict that younger cohorts become more attached as they age; a cohort account would predict that the current young generation remains less attached throughout life; and a period account would predict that all cohorts have softened together, with the young most exposed because their attachments were least consolidated. The literature on adolescent identity formation favours a combination of period and cohort effects: if the infrastructures through which young people acquire identity have changed - from local, place-based institutions to algorithmic feeds - then the content and intensity of national attachment should be expected to differ systematically by generation rather than merely by age (Haidt, 2024; UNESCO, 2026). The cross-sectional evidence cannot settle this; only repeated measurement of the same cohorts can.

4.3 Sorting: When Identities Align

The second finding is that identities have become mutually entailed. Panel (b) of Figure 3 shows the partisan gradient in national pride: ninety-two per cent of Republicans reported high pride in 2025, against fifty-three per cent of independents and thirty-six per cent of Democrats (Gallup, 2025). A gap of fifty-six percentage points on an item supposedly about the nation rather than the party indicates that national attachment is now substantially an expression of a partisan identity rather than an alternative to it.

Sorting extends beyond politics into the information environment. Pew Research Center (2025) finds almost no overlap between partisan groups in their most trusted news sources, and pronounced differences in platform preference: Instagram use reaches about eighty per cent among eighteen to twenty-nine-year-olds against roughly nineteen per cent among those aged sixty-five and over, while partisan groups cluster on different platforms altogether. Where audiences, sources and platforms diverge, members of rival identity groups encounter not only different conclusions but different facts, which makes the boundaries between them harder to negotiate.

However, the sorting thesis should not be overstated. Reanalysis of the American National Election Studies suggests that the increase in social sorting over time is more modest than often claimed, and that much of the apparent trend depends on treating self-reported ideology as a social identity - a move the author argues is theoretically dubious (Bergeron-Boutin, 2024). The defensible conclusion is narrower than the popular one: identities are sorted, and highly sorted individuals are more affectively polarised, but the claim that sorting has dramatically increased requires stronger evidence than is currently available.

4.4 The Platform Ecology of Identity

The third finding concerns the substrate on which identity work now occurs. Identity formation has always depended on the availability of audiences and the visibility of categories; what has changed is that both are now allocated by systems optimising for engagement. The relevant mechanism is not simply that people see more of what they like. It is that repeated exposure to recommended categories normalises them, so that an externally suggested affiliation becomes available as an internal self-description; the person then performs it, generating signals that reinforce the recommendation. Figure 4 represents this as a loop.

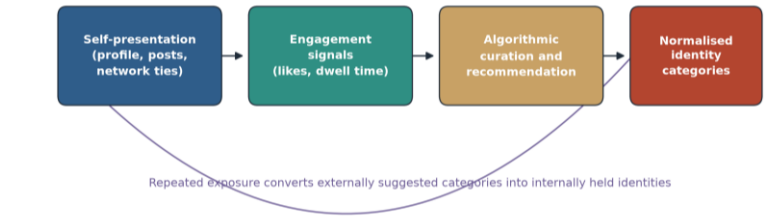


Figure 4. The algorithmic feedback loop in identity formation

The strongest quantitative support for the mechanism comes from late adolescence, the life stage at which identity consolidation is most active. In a study of one hundred and fifty students aged eighteen and nineteen, more than sixty per cent - disproportionately young women - reported substantial social comparison and appearance pressure following algorithmic exposure; users of appearance-oriented, engagement-driven platforms reported markedly higher odds of such pressure than users of other platforms; and greater diversity of recommended topics was protective, reducing identity strain and supporting a more balanced sense of self (Sajipratha, 2025). The pattern is exactly what a mediation account predicts: the content of recommendation shapes the content of self-evaluation.

Qualitative evidence identifies the distributional consequences. Because visibility is unevenly allocated, the capacity to construct a recognisable identity is itself unequal. Young people in Jordan described adjusting language, dress and lifestyle to what the platform appeared to reward, with those lacking the 'right' cultural and aesthetic capital subject to what might be called algorithmic invisibility (Alkhazaleh et al., 2025). The same mechanism has a liberating face: immigrant creators used TikTok to build community across borders and to complicate fixed notions of home and belonging (Watson et al., 2025). Mediation is not simply oppressive; it redistributes the capacity to be recognised.

4.5 Algorithmic Identity Work

Table 3 summarises the four digital-identity studies in the corpus. Despite very different methods and settings, all four identify the same structural relationship: identity content is supplied from outside the person, is performed for an audience whose reactions are quantified, and is fed back as a revised self-description. The studies also agree on the moderating conditions - visibility regimes, content diversity, and the availability of alternative communities - that determine whether the loop narrows or broadens a person's identity.

Table 3. Characteristics of the four digital-identity studies

Study	Setting and sample	Method	Core finding
Alkhazaleh et al. (2025)	Jordan; 25 interviewees in Amman, Irbid and Karak	Semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis	Digital identities are assembled under invisible algorithmic surveillance; class, gender and geography shape who becomes visible
Watson et al. (2025)	United States; 100 TikTok posts by African and Asian immigrant creators	Digital narrative analysis	'Transbordered algorithmic identities': belonging assembled across borders through platform recommendation
Elyamany (2025)	Instagram; 35 sponsored posts by one virtual influencer	Chronotopic and social-semiotic analysis	Authenticity is produced through the interaction of semiotic resources, timing and algorithmic visibility
Sajipratha (2025)	Sri Lanka; 150 students aged 18-19	Survey with exposure, content-diversity and pressure indices; multinomial logistic regression	Algorithmic exposure predicts identity pressure; content diversity is protective

Two cross-cutting observations deserve emphasis. First, none of the four studies treats the platform as a neutral channel: in each, the technical system is an agent in the relationship. Second, all four identify visibility - not expression - as the scarce resource. People can always produce self-descriptions; whether anyone encounters them, and therefore whether they consolidate into a social identity, depends on allocation by the system. This reframes identity inequality as a question of distribution rather than of voice.

4.6 Measuring What Identity Now Does

The fourth finding is methodological and bears directly on the interpretation of the previous three. The field's measurement apparatus was built for stable categories and is only partially adequate for contemporary conditions. The Affective Polarization Scale is a substantial improvement on single-item feeling thermometers: fifteen items across social distance, aversion and incivility, with internal consistency between .90 and .96 and expected convergent associations with authoritarianism, identity strength and need for closure (McMurtrie et al., 2024). Its limitation is that it measures aversion towards a specified out-group; it presupposes that the identity boundary is known in advance.

The longitudinal application of that instrument produced a result that should temper the strongest claims in the field. Using models that separate within-person from between-person variance, social identity threat predicted subsequent increases in affective polarisation, and stress predicted polarisation, but neither polarisation nor identity threat predicted deterioration in social support, stress or health (McMurtrie, 2025). The implication is that much of the apparent wellbeing cost of polarisation may reflect stable differences between people rather than the effect of polarisation on people. For a field inclined to treat identity threat as a social determinant of health, this is a consequential correction.

Kiesel and Amlani (2025) address a different gap: closed scales record how much aversion exists but not what motivates it. Asking respondents to supply one word for their own party and one for the opposition, and then to code the sentiment themselves, yields both an intensity and a reason, and correlates strongly with established measures. The procedure is cheap, portable beyond partisanship, and - in a period when identity vocabularies are changing quickly - more likely to capture new categories than a fixed item battery.

4.7 A Typology of Contemporary Identity Configurations

Bringing the strands together, the analysis suggests that the analytically useful unit is not a single identity but a configuration: a stable arrangement of several identities, characterised by how firmly they are anchored and how permeable their boundaries are. Figure 5 proposes six configurations along those two axes.

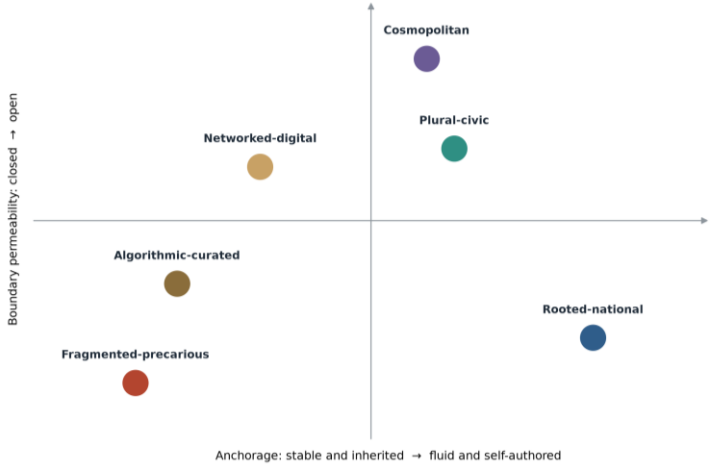


Figure 5. A typology of contemporary identity configurations

The rooted-national configuration is anchored in ascriptive bonds with relatively closed boundaries; it remains the majority pattern among older cohorts in most national contexts, and its declining prevalence is what Figure 2 measures. The plural-civic configuration combines a moderate national attachment with multiple cross-cutting memberships and open boundaries; it is the configuration most conducive to cohesion and the one most threatened by sorting. The cosmopolitan configuration is anchored in universalist commitments with highly

permeable boundaries, common among the highly mobile and highly educated. The networked-digital configuration is anchored in platform-mediated communities whose boundaries are maintained by algorithmic rather than geographic proximity. The algorithmic-curated configuration is one in which the categories themselves are supplied predominantly by recommendation systems, producing identities that are fluid in content but often rigid in affect. The fragmented-precarious configuration combines weak anchorage with closed boundaries - the condition in which belonging is most needed and least available.

Table 4 summarises the findings against the questions the study began with. The typology is proposed as a heuristic for further research rather than as a validated classification; establishing its empirical distribution requires measures that do not yet exist at scale.

Table 4. Summary of findings by research question

Research question	Finding	Principal evidence	Confidence
Is collective identification weakening?	Intensity of national attachment has fallen sharply; the trend is convergent across programmes	Gallup (2025); YouGov (2025); More in Common (2024)	High (within-country; low cross-national)
Is the decline generational?	Yes: a monotonic cohort gradient, steepest for Gen Z	Gallup (2025); YouGov (2025)	High (descriptive); life-cycle vs cohort unresolved
Are identities becoming sorted?	Identities are sorted and sorted individuals polarise more; long-run increase is less clear	Gallup (2025); Pew (2025); Bergeron-Boutin (2024)	Moderate
Does algorithmic mediation shape identity?	Yes: externally supplied categories become internal self-descriptions; visibility is unequally distributed	Sajipratha (2025); Alkhazaleh et al. (2025); Watson et al. (2025); Elyamany (2025)	Moderate (small samples, diverse settings)
Is polarisation harmful to wellbeing?	Identity threat predicts polarisation; reverse paths to wellbeing are not supported within persons	McMurtrie (2025); McMurtrie et al. (2024)	Moderate
Are current measures adequate?	Partly: valid instruments exist but presuppose stable, known boundaries	McMurtrie et al. (2024); Kiesel & Amlani (2025)	High

4.8 Configurations Beyond the United States

Because the trend evidence is American, one further question should be addressed directly: do these patterns travel? The available comparative evidence suggests that they travel partially and differently. In the Middle East and North Africa, Arab Barometer's eighth wave found that national and religious attachments remain strong while confidence in institutions erodes, so that attachment and discontent rise together rather than trading off against each other (Arab Barometer, 2025). In Europe, the Reuters Institute's (2025) cross-national work documents divergent news repertoires and platform dependencies across countries with similar income levels, indicating that sorting is shaped by national media systems rather than by technology alone. And the global youth report argues that young people across regions are actively reworking the terms of belonging, often through organised rather than inherited affiliations (UNESCO, 2026).

The comparative implication is that intensity, sorting and mediation are separable variables whose combination varies by context. A society can exhibit strong attachment with high sorting and low mediation, or weak attachment with low sorting and high mediation, and the cohesion consequences differ accordingly. The American pattern - declining intensity, high sorting, high mediation - is therefore one configuration among several rather than a universal trajectory. This is the most important caution to carry into the Discussion, and it is the clearest argument for the cross-national measurement programme recommended in Section 6.

5. Discussion

5.1 Identity as a Layered, Mediated System

The findings support the layered model in Figure 1, but they also require a correction to it. The classical model treats sources of identity content as given to the person by birth, institution or achievement. The evidence reviewed here indicates that a fourth source - algorithmic affordance - now operates alongside the other three, and that it differs from them in an important respect: it is adaptive. Ascription, achievement and election supply categories that a person can accept or refuse; curation supplies categories in response to what the person has already done, which makes refusal harder and the boundary between offered and chosen identity harder to locate. This is why the recursive loop in Figure 1 is drawn as a loop rather than as an arrow, and why the model treats outcomes as feeding back into sources.

The implication for theory is that identity should be analysed as a system rather than as a property. What matters is not only which identity a person holds, but how their several identities are arranged, how strongly they are anchored, how permeable their boundaries are, and which institutions allocate recognition among them. A person with two firmly anchored and cross-cutting identities occupies a very different social position from a person with one firmly anchored identity and one curated one, even if the content of the identities is the same.

5.2 Why Declining National Attachment Matters Differently Than It Appears

A falling pride series is easily read as social decay. The evidence suggests a more specific reading. What has declined is intensity, not necessarily membership: most people continue to describe themselves as attached to their country, but fewer describe that attachment in the strongest available terms, and the young and the politically dissatisfied are conspicuously less intense (Gallup, 2025; YouGov, 2025). Two mechanisms plausibly explain this. The first is politicisation: as national attachment becomes entangled with partisan identity, those who dislike the incumbent government express that dislike through the national item. The second is compositional: cohorts socialised in a period of institutional distrust, and into platform-mediated rather than place-mediated community, simply form national attachments of a different kind and strength.

The distinction has policy consequences. If the decline reflects politicisation, it should be reversible when governments change. If it reflects cohort replacement, it will not - and the task becomes one of building civic attachments that do not depend on the intensity of national feeling.

A third mechanism deserves attention because it is easily overlooked. Identities differ in how they are acquired: some are inherited and unchosen, some are achieved through effort, and some are supplied by systems responding to behaviour. Where a large share of identity content is supplied rather than achieved, the ordinary psychological payoffs of identification - self-esteem, continuity, a sense of agency - are weaker, because the person has not authored the membership even though they perform it. This may help explain why declining intensity and rising mediation appear together in the evidence: it is not that people care less about belonging, but that a growing share of their affiliations is experienced as something that happens to them rather than as something they have made. The plural-civic configuration in Figure 5 describes what such an attachment might look like: moderate national anchorage, multiple cross-cutting memberships, open boundaries. Its vulnerability is precisely sorting, which collapses cross-cutting ties into a single aligned bundle.

5.3 Sorting, Threat and the Question of Violence

Sen's (2006) warning about the illusion of destiny - the reduction of plural affiliations to one - finds support here, but the mechanism requires care. Sorting does not in itself produce hostility; it produces the conditions in which any given affiliation carries more social meaning, so that a challenge to one becomes a challenge to all. Fukuyama's (2018) account of the demand for dignity supplies the affective charge: what is experienced is not disagreement but disrespect. The longitudinal evidence is more precise still: identity threat precedes increases in polarisation, which suggests that polarisation is defensive rather than aggressive - a response to anticipated rejection rather than an assertion of superiority (McMurtrie, 2025).

If that is right, the popular remedies are aimed at the wrong target. Interventions that exhort people to be less polarised ask individuals to lower a defence. The more promising lever is signalling: since threat arises from what people believe opponents think of them, reducing perceived contempt should reduce defensive polarisation. Comparative evidence from other regions cautions against assuming the American pattern is universal. Arab Barometer's eighth wave found that publics in several Middle Eastern societies hold strong national and religious attachments while simultaneously expressing deep dissatisfaction with institutions and declining support for liberal democracy - a configuration in which attachment and discontent rise together rather than trading off (Arab Barometer, 2025). Identity intensity and institutional trust are separable variables, and models that treat them as

one will misread most of the world.

5.4 Intersectionality, Operationally

The literature review noted that intersectionality is easier to assert than to operationalise. The findings suggest a practical route. If identity is a configuration, then intersectionality is not a matter of adding categories but of describing arrangements: which identities are anchored, which are cross-cutting, which are contested, and which have been supplied by systems rather than chosen. The typology in Figure 5 is an attempt to specify that vocabulary. It also exposes a measurement problem that additive models hide: two people may hold the same categories in very different arrangements, and administrative data that records only the categories will treat them as identical.

This has a concrete implication for survey design. Instruments should ask not only whether a person belongs to a group but how much the membership matters relative to others, how contested it feels, and whether it was chosen or assigned. The open-ended, self-coded procedure of Kiesel and Amlani (2025) is one model; a ranked salience battery is another. Neither is currently standard.

5.5 Recognition, Visibility and Justice

The final implication concerns distribution. If identity consolidation depends on recognition by an audience, and if the allocation of audiences is now performed by systems optimising for engagement, then the capacity to become a recognisable somebody is distributed by criteria that are neither democratic nor legible. The Jordanian findings describe the resulting adaptation - modifying language, appearance and lifestyle to secure visibility - and the resulting inequality in who becomes visible at all (Alkhazaleh et al., 2025). Bourdieu's (1984) account of distinction was written for a world of cultural goods; the equivalent mechanism now operates on attention, which is scarcer and more consequential because recognition is a precondition of identity rather than a reward for it.

Three responses follow, none of them sufficient alone. Platform transparency and auditability would make allocation legible and contestable. Content-diversity interventions have experimental support as protective against identity strain among adolescents (Sajipratha, 2025). And offline institutions - schools, universities, local government, youth organisations - remain the only sites where recognition is allocated by criteria that can be publicly defended. The youth-report literature argues that young people themselves should be treated as co-designers of those institutions rather than as their beneficiaries (UNESCO, 2026). That recommendation follows directly from the analysis here: if identity is co-produced, then the institutions that co-produce it should include those whose identities are at stake.

5.6 Practical Implications

For practitioners, four implications follow from the synthesis.

- Measure intensity, not membership. Instruments that record only whether someone identifies with a group will miss the change documented in Section 4.1, which is a change in intensity rather than in affiliation.
- Treat cross-cutting ties as infrastructure. Social cohesion depends less on the strength of any single identity than on the presence of memberships that cut across the main cleavage; sorting destroys exactly these.
- Attend to perceived contempt. If polarisation is defensive, programmes that reduce perceived out-group contempt should reduce polarisation more effectively than programmes that argue against polarisation.
- Make visibility contestable. Where recognition is allocated algorithmically, transparency, diversity obligations and appeal mechanisms are identity-policy instruments, not merely technology regulation.

6. Conclusions

This article asked how collective identities are now formed, maintained and contested. The answer, on the evidence assembled here, is that identity has become simultaneously weaker, more sorted and more externally supplied. It is weaker in the sense that the intensity of national attachment has fallen sharply where it is measured over time, most markedly among younger cohorts. It is more sorted in the sense that affiliations which once cross-cut now align, so that national, partisan, cultural and platform memberships predict one another and raise the stakes of any single one. And it is more externally supplied in the sense that a growing share of the categories through which people describe themselves is recommended to them by systems with commercial objectives and uneven distributions of visibility.

These three movements interact. Declining anchorage leaves people more dependent on supplied categories; supplied categories are more likely to be sorted, because recommendation systems cluster; and sorted, algorithmic identities are more likely to generate threat, because they are experienced as both chosen and

contested. The result is the configuration the typology labels fragmented-precarious - weak anchorage with closed boundaries - which is the condition in which belonging is most intensely needed and least reliably available.

The article's principal theoretical claim is that identity should be analysed as a configuration rather than a property, and its principal practical claim is that the relevant policy object is not which identity people hold but the ecology that allocates recognition among identities. Both claims are offered with the limitations stated in Section 3.5. The quantitative trend evidence is concentrated in one country; the qualitative evidence is concentrated in small samples; and the analysis works from published marginals rather than unit-record data. Establishing the empirical distribution of the configurations proposed in Figure 5 requires instruments that measure salience, contestation and provenance alongside membership - instruments that the field has not yet built at scale.

Two research priorities follow. The first is measurement: a cross-national instrument measuring the arrangement of identities, fielded repeatedly so that cohort and period effects can be separated, is the single most valuable investment available to the field. The second is institutional: we lack systematic evidence on whether schools, universities, municipalities and platform governance regimes can deliberately sustain cross-cutting identities under conditions of sorting. Given that identity is co-produced, that question is not merely academic - it is the practical form of the question of how diverse societies hold together.

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