



Between Roots and Screens: How Older Gen Alpha Interprets Cultural Heritage through Self-Expression

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Abstract

Generation Alpha is experiencing a unique environment where inherited culture and digital life are deeply connected. In the Indian context, young people often come across their cultural identity through family traditions, language, festivals, regional customs, and the values of their community. At the same time, they are shaped by social media, gaming, global visual trends, and new forms of expression that are emerging with technology. In this paper, I try to look at how older members of Gen Alpha, especially those between 14 and 16 years old, make sense of and navigate their cultural heritage within these overlapping spaces. This study takes an exploratory and qualitative approach, mainly based on reviewing existing literature and observing current trends in social media and digital culture. I have focused on bringing together research that looks at digital identity, the influence of family, how culture is passed on, participation in heritage, and the ways young people express themselves. Secondary reports and observations have also helped to build a clearer picture of the present landscape. From the findings, it seems that cultural identity is now shaped more by context, even as family and community still play a strong role. Heritage is no longer just passed down in one direction; instead, it is becoming something that young people participate in, adapt, and reinterpret for themselves. Looking at these patterns, I have tried to outline a Heritage-Self Negotiation Framework, which moves through five stages: cultural encounter, personal meaning, negotiation, self-expression, and cultural continuity. In this journey, heritage can be inherited, identified with, adapted, mixed with other influences, or sometimes even kept at a distance. It is also important to notice the difference between how visible a cultural symbol is and what it actually means to someone. Sometimes, a symbol can be everywhere online but may not have much personal meaning, while other practices that are less visible can still carry deep emotional value. So, I believe that keeping culture alive is not just about holding on to traditions, but also about allowing young people the space to understand, question, and find their own meaning in what they inherit.

Keywords: Generation Alpha; Cultural Heritage; Self-Expression; Digital Identity; Cultural Continuity

Introduction

Generation Alpha is experiencing a childhood where family traditions and digital culture are both present in daily life. For many young people, learning about culture still happens through festivals, family stories, language, clothing, food, and community practices. At the same time, they are also shaped by social media, gaming, global entertainment, influencers, and now even AI-generated visuals.



With all these influences blending together, the way culture is understood today is quite different from how earlier generations experienced it.

Much of the research on Generation Alpha has looked at how they use technology, behave online, and live in digital spaces. Budău (2024) and Piccerillo et al. (2025) highlight that these digital environments are now important for how young people present themselves, compare with others, and develop their identities. Yet, cultural identity is still influenced by parents, elders, local traditions, and shared practices, as other studies show. What is changing is that this influence is no longer just passed down in one direction. Young people today are not only learning culture, but also making sense of it, adapting it, and sometimes changing it to fit their own experiences.

This is especially true in India, where identity is shaped by many layers at the same time, such as family, region, language, religion, community, nation, and the wider world. For older members of Gen Alpha, especially those between 14 and 16, cultural identity is not just about accepting or rejecting tradition. Some parts of culture might feel important and personal, others might feel forced, and many are adapted or blended with modern and global influences.

This study aims to explore how older Gen Alpha in India understands cultural heritage and how they express this understanding within their families, among friends, and online. It looks at how inherited culture stays meaningful, how digital and global trends influence that meaning, and how young people find their own balance between tradition and modern identity. Instead of only looking at how culture is preserved, this research focuses on how the new generation makes sense of it, questions it, reshapes it, and carries it forward in their own way.

Literature Review

Research concerning Generation Alpha is still in its early stages, most of it beginning from the same premise that this generation is growing up with technology already part of daily life. Yet present-day studies tend to concentrate mainly on the use of technology and fail to examine how these young people develop their sense of identity, deal with family values, and interact with cultural traditions. This shows there is a gap in the research regarding how Generation Alpha deals with and negotiates their cultural identity in digital settings. In order to fill this gap, the present study looks at how older members of Generation Alpha interpret, negotiate, and take part in cultural heritage as they move between family, peer, and digital environments. The research aims to make clear how digital influences interact with different factors in shaping identity and to predict how Generation Alpha's engagement with their roots will develop in different contexts. Nurpratiwi, Akhir, and Marsuki (2025) found that digital technology affects not only communication and education but also social relationships and cultural experiences. Their study also states that digital exposure can increase access to knowledge while at the same time altering the way cultural values are understood and practiced.

Identity takes on greater interest when digital spaces are seen as places in which young people actively present themselves. Budău (2024) states that members of Generation Alpha use virtual environments not just to reproduce but to construct and re-interpret their identity. In a similar way, Hayati and Murtado (2025) reach the same conclusion as a result of their phenomenological study of Gen Alpha students; they discovered that digital identities can be fluid, temporary, and influenced by the social expectations that exist online. This is significant in the Indian context since a teenager aged 14 to 16 may not show



the same cultural self in all situations. The way culture is expressed at home, among friends, at school, or online can differ greatly.

Livingstone (2024) offers a useful point by warning us not to regard "digital" as a single, general category. I believe that this distinction is important since adolescents use different platforms for specific reasons, which in turn leads to a form of self-expression that changes depending on the audience, the technology involved, and the situation. In my view, these complexities are especially relevant to research into cultural identity, since the context alters the meaning of any particular cultural reference. For instance, the same reference posted in a family's WhatsApp group has a different meaning when it appears in an Instagram reel, in a gaming avatar, or in an AI-generated image. In my opinion, this kind of variation makes it difficult—maybe even misleading—to study cultural identity by means of a simple online-versus-offline approach.

The family continues to play a significant role in this process. Rismayanti and others (2026) refer to the family as an "identity laboratory", meaning that children make use of family communication as a setting in which to try out different ideas and forms of identity before these become more fixed. Their research also indicates that participatory family communication can lead to greater openness and encourage more identity exploration. Ogonowska (2025) contributes another valuable point by means of the idea of glocalisation. She finds that global digital trends are not adopted in the same way all over the world; instead they pass through family values, social background and local circumstances. This is especially pertinent in India, since there local, regional, religious, linguistic and national identities usually coexist rather than being part of a single cultural layer.

Umar and others in 2025 bring family and cultural identity closer together by demonstrating that parents and older members function as cultural mediators in a digital environment. Families are able to help children remain connected with cultural values through storytelling, the preservation of local traditions and guided use of digital media. Nevertheless, an important question remains: even if culture is passed on, what actually does the young person make of it? The act of receiving a culture and identifying with it are not always identical.

Heritage studies also reveals a steady move away from mere preservation. Mostafa, Metawi and Cecil (2022) find that heritage learning is more meaningful when children get involved through stories, museums and participation rather than merely through formal teaching or only via screens. Aljas et al. (2025) go a step further by claiming that young people should be seen as active participants and co-creators of heritage and culture in society, not just as recipients of tradition. Likewise, Chen et al. (2026) demonstrate that intangible cultural heritage can become relevant when it is incorporated into current digital experiences such as video games.

The importance of the Indian aspect is more apparent in the study by Pul and Meena (2025) into tribal identity in Arunachal Pradesh. This study highlights a most interesting point, namely that young people are giving up traditional ways; in certain instances they are employing digital platforms and community projects in order to reinterpret and revive their cultural identity in a highly creative manner.

Indeed, these studies show that three major trends are taking place at the same time: identity is becoming more contextual, the family still acts as a important cultural influence, and heritage is moving from one-way transmission to greater interpretation and participation. A more in-depth examination of these sources shows that while Rismayanti et al. (2026) stress the family's key role as an "identity laboratory",



Budău (2024) and Hayati and Murtado (2025) focus on the adaptability and fluidity of identity in digital environments. At the same time, the works of Mostafa, Metawi, and Cecil (2022) and Aljas et al. (2025) point to a shift in heritage from passive inheritance to active co-creation. Nevertheless, even though there are these overlapping findings, there is still a limited understanding of how older members of Generation Alpha understand and negotiate the culture they have inherited as they go through family, peer, and digital environments. The present study therefore treats cultural heritage not just as something to be preserved or rejected, but as a dynamic resource which can be accepted, questioned, adapted, combined, or distanced from during the process of forming one's identity. These observations suggest that future research should more specifically look at the subtle ways in which Generation Alpha's engagement with cultural heritage affects their identity development and cultural participation in a variety of social and digital contexts. This kind of research could provide useful insights for educators, policymakers, and families who want to promote genuine cultural engagement in an ever more digital society.

Research Gap

Recent research highlights that Generation Alpha is being explored more and more in terms of digital environments, self-presentation, family influence, and cultural participation. Yet, these topics are usually looked at in isolation. While there is work explaining how young people shape their identity online, how families share values, or how heritage is communicated through museums and digital platforms, we still do not fully understand how all these influences interact in the daily lives of older members of Gen Alpha.

Especially in the Indian context, there is still not much research focusing on adolescents aged 14 to 16 and how they make sense of their inherited culture as they move between family, friends, and digital spaces. Most studies tend to look at how culture is passed on or how young people behave online, but they do not really explore how these adolescents themselves find meaning in their cultural background. We also do not know clearly whether cultural references feel like a sense of belonging, a duty, an adaptation, a mix of influences, or something more distant to them. This study aims to fill that gap by focusing on how older Gen Alpha interpret their own cultural heritage and how it becomes meaningful, changes, or sometimes loses its importance as they express themselves in different settings.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative, desk-based approach rather than collecting primary data directly from adolescents. The purpose is to understand how older Generation Alpha may be negotiating cultural heritage and self-expression by bringing together existing academic research, industry and cultural reports, and observations of current digital and social-media trends.

The first stage consists of a focused literature review based on the selected body of 11 papers dealing with Generation Alpha, digital identity, family influence, cultural heritage, self-expression, and youth participation. These studies are reviewed thematically rather than treated as isolated summaries. Particular attention is given to recurring ideas such as identity formation, digital self-presentation, family mediation, glocalisation, heritage transmission, participation, and cultural reinterpretation. The second stage involves reviewing relevant secondary reports and publicly available cultural and digital



trend material. These sources are used to understand the wider environment in which older Gen Alpha is currently growing up, particularly the influence of social media, gaming, visual culture, global aesthetics, and emerging AI-enabled forms of expression. A third layer of the study is observational. Publicly visible social-media trends, visual references, styling practices, gaming-related expressions, and cultural content are examined to identify how traditional or heritage-linked references are being represented, adapted, combined, or detached from their original contexts. The observation is interpretive rather than statistical and is used to support patterns emerging from the literature.

The collected material is analysed through thematic analysis, with attention to themes such as inheritance, belonging, adaptation, hybridisation, digital influence, cultural visibility, and detachment. As the study does not involve direct interaction with minors or collection of personal data, no participant-based fieldwork is conducted. Public digital material is treated at trend level, without identifying individual users.

This approach allows the paper to develop a conceptual understanding of how cultural heritage may move from simple transmission towards interpretation and self-expression among older Gen Alpha.

Discussion

The review suggests that older Generation Alpha is not simply becoming detached from culture because of digital exposure. A more useful way to understand what is happening is to see cultural identity as something that is being negotiated. Young people are still exposed to family traditions, language, festivals, regional practices and community values, but these influences now sit beside social media, gaming, global visual culture and other digital experiences. The point is not that one is replacing the other. Rather, both are becoming part of the same identity environment.

Budău (2024) and Hayati and Murtado (2025) show that digital spaces allow young people to present different versions of themselves depending on the setting and audience. Livingstone (2024) also reminds us that “digital” is not one single space. A cultural reference shared at home, posted on Instagram, used in a gaming avatar or recreated through an AI image can carry very different meanings. This makes identity more contextual and also makes cultural expression harder to read through a simple traditional-versus-modern lens.

The family still plays an important role. Rismayanti et al. (2026) describe the family as an “identity laboratory,” while Umar et al. (2025) show how parents and elders continue to act as cultural mediators. However, cultural transmission appears to be changing from a one-way process into something more interactive. Young people may accept some practices, question others, or adapt them to suit their own lives. Ogonowska’s (2025) idea of glocalisation is useful here because it explains how global influences can be filtered through local family and cultural realities rather than simply replacing them.

Heritage studies point in the same direction. Mostafa, Metawi, and Cecil (2022) emphasise participation and experience, while Aljas et al. (2025) argue that young people should be treated as co-creators of heritage. Chen et al. (2026) further show that cultural heritage can remain relevant when it enters contemporary digital environments. Pul and Meena (2025), in the Indian context, similarly suggest that

younger people may use digital platforms not only to move away from tradition, but also to recover and reshape cultural identity.

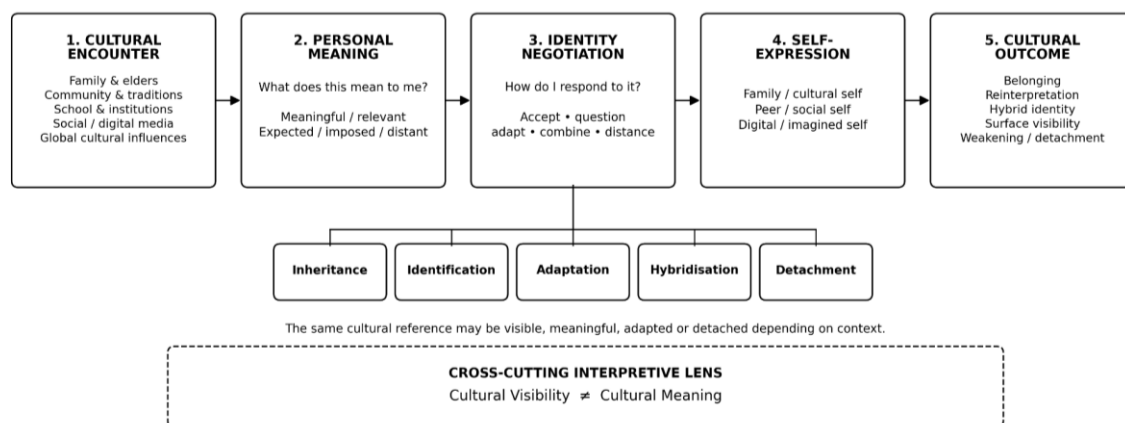
Based on these observations, this paper proposes a Heritage-Self Negotiation Framework:

Cultural Encounter → Personal Meaning → Negotiation → Self-Expression → Cultural Continuity

The process begins with cultural encounter through family, community, school, media, festivals, clothing, language or digital platforms. The next stage is personal meaning: whether the young person finds the cultural reference meaningful, expected, interesting, distant or imposed. This is followed by negotiation, where heritage may be inherited, identified with, adapted, hybridised or distanced from. It then becomes visible through self-expression in physical or digital settings.

An important distinction also emerges between cultural visibility and cultural meaning. A cultural symbol may be highly visible online without carrying much understanding, while another practice may remain private but hold strong emotional value. The framework therefore shifts attention from whether culture is present to what it actually means to the young person. Cultural continuity may depend less on exact repetition and more on whether younger generations are given space to understand, question and reinterpret what they inherit.

Figure 1. Heritage–Self Negotiation Framework for Older Generation Alpha



The Heritage–Self Negotiation Framework explains how cultural references move from everyday exposure to personal interpretation, negotiation, and finally self-expression. It also highlights that cultural continuity depends not only on how visible heritage is, but on the meaning young people attach to it across family, peer, and digital contexts.

Conclusions

This study set out to explore how older Generation Alpha may be negotiating cultural heritage while moving between family, peer and digital environments. The literature suggests that cultural identity is



becoming more contextual, while family, community and digital spaces continue to influence how young people understand and express themselves.

Rather than viewing Generation Alpha as either connected to or disconnected from tradition, the paper proposes that their relationship with heritage can be understood as a process of negotiation. Cultural references may be inherited, personally identified with, adapted, combined with global influences or sometimes distanced from. The proposed Heritage-Self Negotiation Framework brings these possibilities together and places personal meaning at the centre of the process.

The study also highlights that cultural visibility should not automatically be treated as cultural understanding. A symbol may be highly visible in digital culture without carrying deeper meaning, while less visible practices may remain personally important. For the Indian context, this distinction is especially relevant because identity is already shaped through multiple regional, linguistic, family and national influences. Future research could test this framework with older Gen Alpha directly and examine how these different forms of cultural negotiation influence belonging, identity and cultural participation over time.

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