



Collective Identity Formation in Youth Organizations: A Social Identity Perspective on Scouting Development Mechanisms

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Abstrak

The increasing complexity of youth development in contemporary societies requires a deeper understanding of how identity is formed within structured social environments. This article addresses the theoretical fragmentation between social identity theory, identity development, and Positive Youth Development by proposing a mechanism-based conceptual framework that explains how collective identity emerges in youth organizations. The study aims to identify and integrate the key processes linking structured participation, group interaction, and identity internalization into a coherent explanatory model. Using a theory-building approach grounded in integrative synthesis, the framework conceptualizes identity formation as a multi-level and process-oriented phenomenon shaped by social categorization, norm internalization, emotional attachment, and identity reinforcement. The model further explains how these mechanisms collectively produce a shared sense of belonging and ultimately translate into civic orientation and prosocial behavior. The proposed framework contributes theoretically by repositioning identity as a central mechanism rather than an outcome, offering a more precise explanation of how participation leads to developmental and behavioral effects. It also provides a foundation for future empirical research and practical applications in designing identity-driven youth development programs.

Keywords

collective identity; identity internalization; mechanism-based theory; social identity theory; structured participation; youth development

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1. Introduction

The increasing complexity of contemporary societies has intensified the importance of understanding how young individuals develop identity, belonging, and civic responsibility. Adolescents today navigate not only traditional social structures such as family, school, and community organizations, but also digitally mediated environments that reshape how identity is constructed and expressed. As a result, identity formation is no longer confined to stable social contexts but emerges through dynamic interactions across multiple domains, including hybrid offline and online spaces (Nesi *et al.*, 2022; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Within this evolving landscape, youth organizations remain critical institutional arenas that provide structured opportunities for interaction, engagement, and meaning-making (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Youniss *et al.*, 2002).

A substantial body of literature has established identity formation as a central developmental task during adolescence, shaping long-term behavioral, psychological, and social outcomes. Classical frameworks conceptualize identity as a process of exploration and commitment, in which individuals actively negotiate personal values and social roles over time (Marcia, 1966; Schwartz, 2001; Meeus, 2011). Contemporary research further extends this view by emphasizing the dynamic, relational, and context-dependent nature of identity, suggesting that identity is co-constructed through continuous interaction with social environments (Crocetti, 2017; Branje, 2022). In addition, emerging scholarship highlights the role of narrative processes, where adolescents construct coherent self-stories that integrate personal experiences with collective meanings (McLean *et al.*, 2020; Syed & McLean, 2021).

Parallel to identity development research, social identity theory provides a powerful explanatory framework for understanding how individuals define themselves in relation to group memberships. The theory posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, internalize group norms, and derive self-concept from group affiliation (Tajfel *et al.*, 1971; Tajfel, 1974; Hogg, 2001). These processes are not merely cognitive but are embedded in social interaction and collective meaning systems, shaping attitudes, behaviors, and group-oriented actions (Ellemers *et al.*, 2002; Stets & Burke, 2000). Recent developments further emphasize that social identity is fluid and continuously negotiated across contexts, particularly in environments characterized by multiple and overlapping group affiliations (Kende *et al.*, 2021).

The intersection of identity development and group processes has led to growing scholarly attention to collective identity, defined as a shared sense of belonging and common purpose that emerges through sustained interaction. Collective identity plays a central role in fostering cooperation, solidarity, and civic engagement among youth (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). Empirical studies demonstrate that participation in organized group activities significantly enhances social integration, belonging, and long-term engagement (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Lawford & Ramey, 2017). Moreover, recent research suggests that collective identity is not only a cognitive alignment but also an affective and motivational construct, reinforced through emotional attachment and shared experiences (Thomas *et al.*, 2020; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2018).

Within the field of youth development, the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework has emphasized the role of supportive environments in fostering competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner *et al.*, 2005; Bowers *et al.*, 2010; Catalano *et al.*, 2004). These dimensions are associated with thriving and civic contribution outcomes. However, despite its strong empirical grounding, recent critiques argue that PYD often under-specifies the mechanisms linking structured participation to developmental outcomes, treating identity as an implicit rather than explicitly theorized construct (Lerner *et al.*, 2019; Geldhof *et al.*, 2023). This limitation highlights the need for a more detailed, process-oriented explanation of how youth engagement translates into identity formation.

Recent scholarship has begun to address this limitation by focusing on relational and contextual processes such as belonging, social capital, and group norms. A strong sense of belonging has been consistently linked to psychological well-being, motivation, and sustained engagement (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Haslam *et al.*, 2009). Similarly, social capital derived from group participation facilitates trust, cooperation, and civic involvement (Putnam, 2000; Portes, 1998). At the same time, identity formation is increasingly influenced by digital environments, where social interaction, feedback, and symbolic representation extend beyond physical settings (Wray-Lake *et al.*, 2017). While these developments enrich the literature, they also contribute to fragmentation by introducing multiple constructs without integrating them into a coherent explanatory framework (Vignoles *et al.*, 2021; Syed *et al.*, 2024).

Despite these advances, a significant theoretical gap remains. Existing research tends to examine identity development, group processes, and youth engagement in isolation rather than integrating them into a unified explanatory model. As a result, the mechanisms linking structured participation in youth organizations to the formation of collective identity remain insufficiently understood. This limitation is particularly evident in the context of scouting, where practical models of youth development are well established but lack strong theoretical articulation of underlying processes.

Scouting represents a distinctive form of nonformal education that combines structured participation, group-based interaction, and value-oriented practices. Through repeated engagement, shared rituals, and symbolic meaning systems, scouting provides a fertile environment for identity construction. However, existing literature has largely focused on outcomes rather than the mechanisms through which identity is formed within such contexts. This highlights the need for a mechanism-based conceptualization that explains how participation translates into identity internalization and collective outcomes.

Addressing this gap, the present article develops a theory-driven conceptual framework that integrates social identity theory with youth development perspectives to explain collective identity formation in scouting. The framework identifies key constructs and mechanisms that link structured participation, group interaction, and identity internalization across multiple levels of analysis. By adopting a mechanism-based and multi-level approach, the study responds to recent calls for more integrative and process-oriented theorizing in social and developmental sciences (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010; Lerner *et al.*, 2015).

This article makes several contributions to the literature. First, it advances social identity theory by extending its application to youth development contexts and nonformal education systems. Second, it contributes to the PYD literature by providing a mechanism-based explanation of identity formation processes. Third, it offers a multi-level conceptual model that integrates individual, group, and organizational dynamics. Finally, it provides a foundation for future empirical research aimed at testing the proposed mechanisms and extending the framework across different contexts.

The remainder of this article unfolds through a series of interconnected discussions. It begins with a review of the literature on social identity, youth development, and collective engagement, followed by an examination of the existing theoretical gaps and the introduction of the conceptual approach. Building on this foundation, the article advances a conceptual framework along with a set of formal propositions, and concludes by reflecting on its theoretical implications and outlining directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This discussion advances an integrated synthesis of interdisciplinary scholarship on social identity formation, identity development, youth participation, and collective engagement. Rather than positioning these domains as analytically discrete, the review consolidates them

into a unified theoretical foundation that enables a mechanism-based account of collective identity formation within youth organizations. By systematically bridging psychological, relational, and structural dimensions, the analysis establishes a robust conceptual grounding for interpreting scouting as a dynamic identity-forming system.

2.1 Social Identity Theory and Collective Identity Formation

Social identity theory provides a foundational lens for understanding how individuals construct a sense of self through group membership. The theory posits that individuals categorize themselves into social groups, internalize group norms, and derive part of their self-concept from these affiliations (Tajfel *et al.*, 1971; Tajfel, 1974; Hogg, 2001). These processes involve cognitive categorization, evaluative comparison, and emotional attachment, collectively shaping behavior and group alignment (Ellemers *et al.*, 2002; Stets & Burke, 2000).

Self-categorization theory further refines this perspective by explaining how individuals shift between personal and social identities depending on contextual salience. In group contexts, individuals depersonalize their self-concept and align with group norms, allowing collective standards to guide behavior (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Hornsey, 2008). This dynamic process is particularly relevant in youth organizations, where repeated interaction and shared activities increase the salience of group identity.

Collective identity emerges when individuals develop a shared sense of belonging and common purpose through sustained interaction. It reflects not only cognitive alignment but also emotional and relational bonding, which enables coordinated action and long-term engagement (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). Empirical evidence suggests that collective identity is a key driver of cooperation, solidarity, and participation in group-based activities.

Recent developments extend social identity theory into more dynamic and context-sensitive frameworks. Contemporary studies highlight that identity is continuously negotiated across multiple contexts, including digital environments, where group boundaries are more fluid and interaction is less constrained by physical proximity (Kende *et al.*, 2021). This suggests that identity formation within youth organizations should be understood as an ongoing and socially embedded process rather than a static outcome.

2.2 Identity Development in Adolescence

Identity development has long been recognized as a central developmental task during adolescence. Classical models conceptualize identity formation as a process of exploration and commitment, where individuals experiment with different roles and values before consolidating a coherent sense of self (Marcia, 1966; Schwartz, 2001; Meeus, 2011). This process is iterative, involving cycles of reconsideration and refinement rather than a linear progression.

Subsequent research expands this perspective by emphasizing the relational and contextual nature of identity formation. Identity is shaped through ongoing interactions between individuals and their social environments, including peers, institutions, and cultural systems (Kroger, 2017; Meeus, 2011). These interactions influence both the content and structure of identity, highlighting the interplay between agency and social influence.

More recent models provide a nuanced understanding of identity processes by distinguishing between exploration in breadth, exploration in depth, and commitment formation (Luyckx *et al.*, 2006; Luyckx *et al.*, 2008). These dimensions capture how individuals actively construct identity through both cognitive evaluation and experiential engagement.

In addition, contemporary scholarship introduces the concept of narrative identity, where individuals construct meaning by integrating life experiences into coherent personal stories

(McLean *et al.*, 2020; Syed & McLean, 2021). This perspective suggests that identity formation is not only about internalizing roles and norms but also about making sense of experiences within a broader social and cultural context.

The role of digital environments further complicates identity development. Adolescents increasingly engage in identity exploration through online platforms, where social feedback, visibility, and symbolic interaction contribute to identity construction (Nesi *et al.*, 2022). These developments expand traditional identity theory by introducing new mechanisms of interaction and self-presentation.

2.3 Youth Organizations and Positive Youth Development

Youth organizations serve as key developmental contexts by providing structured opportunities for participation, skill development, and social interaction. The PYD framework emphasizes that supportive environments enable youth to develop competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (Lerner *et al.*, 2005; Bowers *et al.*, 2010; Catalano *et al.*, 2004). These dimensions are associated with thriving and long-term civic contribution.

Empirical research consistently demonstrates that participation in structured programs contributes to positive developmental outcomes. Youth engaged in extracurricular and community-based activities show higher levels of academic achievement, social competence, and civic engagement (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). These findings underscore the importance of organized group experiences in shaping developmental trajectories.

The five Cs model further links individual competencies with broader societal contributions, suggesting that well-developed youth are more likely to become active and responsible citizens (Geldhof *et al.*, 2013; Bowers *et al.*, 2010). Mentoring relationships within youth organizations also play a critical role, providing guidance, reinforcement, and opportunities for identity exploration (DuBois *et al.*, 2011; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

However, despite its strengths, the PYD framework has been criticized for its limited attention to underlying mechanisms. Recent studies argue that PYD often treats identity as an implicit outcome rather than explicitly theorizing how identity formation occurs through participation (Lerner *et al.*, 2019; Geldhof *et al.*, 2023). This limitation suggests the need for integrating social identity processes to better explain how structured participation translates into identity development.

2.4 Mechanisms of Collective Engagement and Civic Identity

The literature on collective engagement provides important insights into how participation in group activities leads to civic identity and behavior. The integrative social identity model of collective action posits that group identification, perceived injustice, and efficacy beliefs jointly motivate individuals to engage in collective behavior (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008).

Civic engagement is also shaped by participation in community and service activities, which foster a sense of responsibility, social awareness, and political involvement (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Checkoway & Aldana, 2013). These experiences contribute to the development of civic identity by linking personal values with collective goals.

Social capital theory complements this perspective by emphasizing the role of networks, trust, and shared norms in facilitating cooperation and engagement (Putnam, 2000; Portes, 1998). Youth embedded in strong social networks are more likely to participate in civic activities and develop prosocial orientations.

Moreover, recent research highlights the importance of emotional and motivational mechanisms in collective engagement. Group-based emotions, such as shared pride or moral conviction, interact with identity to sustain participation over time (van Zomeren *et al.*,

2018; Thomas *et al.*, 2020). These findings suggest that identity formation is not purely cognitive but deeply affective and relational.

2.5 Recent Developments in Identity and Youth Engagement

Recent scholarship has significantly expanded understanding of youth identity formation by incorporating contemporary social and technological contexts. One key development is the growing recognition of belonging as a fundamental psychological need that shapes engagement, motivation, and well-being (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Walton & Brady, 2020). A strong sense of belonging enhances persistence and participation in group activities.

Research also highlights the impact of global and societal disruptions on youth identity. Experiences such as social crises and rapid technological change require adaptive identity processes, where individuals continuously renegotiate their sense of self in response to evolving contexts (Branje, 2022).

Advances in measurement and modeling have further improved the ability to capture complex identity dynamics. Multidimensional frameworks now examine the interaction between identity, behavior, and context across time (Wray-Lake *et al.*, 2017; Syed *et al.*, 2024). These approaches emphasize that identity formation is a dynamic system rather than a static construct.

Leadership and group processes remain central to these developments. A social identity approach to leadership suggests that effective leaders cultivate shared identity and align individual motivations with collective goals (Haslam *et al.*, 2011; Reicher *et al.*, 2005). This reinforces the importance of relational dynamics in shaping identity within group settings.

Despite these advances, the literature remains fragmented across disciplines. Identity development, social identity processes, and youth engagement are often studied separately, leading to conceptual gaps and limited theoretical integration (Vignoles *et al.*, 2021). This fragmentation underscores the need for a unified framework that explains how identity formation emerges through identifiable mechanisms across multiple levels.

3. Identifying the Theoretical Gap

The existing body of literature provides substantial insights into identity development, social identity processes, and youth engagement. However, these streams of research have largely evolved in parallel rather than in an integrated manner, resulting in fragmented theoretical explanations. Identity development research has extensively examined how adolescents construct a sense of self through processes of exploration and commitment, focusing primarily on intra-individual psychological dynamics (Marcia, 1966; Schwartz, 2001; Meeus, 2011). In contrast, social identity theory explains how group membership shapes self-definition through categorization, identification, and norm internalization (Tajfel *et al.*, 1971; Hogg, 2001; Stets & Burke, 2000). Despite their conceptual compatibility, these perspectives are rarely synthesized into a unified framework that explains how individual identity processes intersect with group-based dynamics.

At the same time, the PYD literature has demonstrated that structured environments such as youth organizations contribute to a range of developmental outcomes, including competence, connection, and civic engagement (Lerner *et al.*, 2005; Bowers *et al.*, 2010; Catalano *et al.*, 2004). Empirical studies consistently show that participation in organized activities enhances social integration and long-term engagement (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). However, these contributions remain predominantly outcome-oriented, offering limited theoretical explanation of the mechanisms through which participation translates into identity formation. Recent critiques further highlight that identity

is often treated as an implicit byproduct rather than a central explanatory construct within PYD frameworks (Lerner *et al.*, 2019; Geldhof *et al.*, 2023).

Similarly, research on civic engagement and collective action has emphasized the importance of group identification, social capital, and shared norms in motivating participation (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008; Putnam, 2000). While these studies provide valuable insights into the behavioral implications of collective identity, they tend to focus on specific domains such as political participation or activism. As a result, the applicability of these insights to developmental contexts, particularly youth organizations, remains under-theorized. This creates a conceptual disconnect between identity formation and civic outcomes within youth settings.

Recent advances in the literature have begun to emphasize relational and contextual dimensions of identity formation. Studies on belonging and social connectedness demonstrate that interpersonal relationships and group inclusion are central to psychological well-being and sustained engagement (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Haslam *et al.*, 2009). At the same time, contemporary research highlights the increasing role of digital environments in shaping identity processes, where interaction, feedback, and symbolic representation extend beyond physical contexts (Nesi *et al.*, 2022). While these developments enrich understanding, they also introduce additional conceptual layers without adequately integrating them into a coherent explanatory structure. As noted by recent integrative reviews, identity-related constructs are often operationalized inconsistently across studies, leading to conceptual ambiguity and limiting cumulative theory development (Vignoles *et al.*, 2021; Syed *et al.*, 2024).

A critical limitation across these literatures is the absence of a process-oriented explanation that specifies how identity formation unfolds over time. Existing theories identify key constructs such as participation, belonging, norms, and identification, but they rarely articulate the sequential and interactive mechanisms that connect these elements. In particular, there is limited understanding of how structured participation activates social processes such as categorization, norm internalization, and emotional attachment, which ultimately lead to identity internalization. This gap reflects a broader limitation in social and developmental sciences, where variance-based explanations often dominate over mechanism-based theorizing (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010; Borsboom *et al.*, 2021).

In addition to the lack of process clarity, there is also a notable absence of multi-level integration. Identity formation is inherently embedded within interconnected levels of analysis, including individual psychological processes, group-level interactions, and organizational structures. However, most existing studies focus on a single level in isolation. Identity development research emphasizes individual processes, social identity theory focuses on group dynamics, and organizational studies highlight structural influences (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam *et al.*, 2011). The absence of a multi-level framework limits the ability to capture how identity emerges as an emergent phenomenon across these interconnected systems.

Another unresolved issue concerns the role of repeated participation and interaction in stabilizing identity over time. While existing theories acknowledge processes such as social categorization and norm alignment, they do not clearly explain how these processes are reinforced and sustained within structured environments. Research on mentoring and social influence suggests that repeated engagement and relational reinforcement are critical in shaping identity trajectories (DuBois *et al.*, 2011; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008). However, these insights have not been systematically integrated into a coherent identity formation model.

Furthermore, the growing importance of hybrid participation contexts, in which offline and digital interactions intersect, introduces additional complexity that remains insufficiently theorized. Emerging studies indicate that digital environments influence identity construction by enabling new forms of interaction, visibility, and self-presentation (Nesi *et al.*, 2022; Wray-

Lake *et al.*, 2017). However, existing frameworks often conceptualize digital engagement as an external factor rather than as an integral component of identity formation processes. This discrepancy creates a gap between traditional theoretical models and the contemporary realities of youth participation.

Taken together, these limitations reveal a fundamental theoretical gap. There is currently no comprehensive framework that explains how structured participation in youth organizations leads to collective identity formation through identifiable mechanisms operating across multiple levels and contexts. This absence constrains both theoretical advancement and practical application, as it limits the ability to design youth programs that intentionally foster identity development.

To address this gap, the present article proposes a mechanism-based conceptual framework that integrates social identity theory, identity development research, and youth development perspectives. The framework explicates the processes linking structured participation, group interaction, and identity internalization, while incorporating multi-level dynamics and contemporary contextual factors. By doing so, it seeks to provide a coherent and theoretically grounded explanation of collective identity formation in youth organizations, particularly within the context of scouting.

4. Conceptual Approach and Analytical Strategy

Building on the identified theoretical gaps, this study adopts a theory-building approach grounded in integrative synthesis to develop a coherent explanation of collective identity formation in youth organizations. Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the article focuses on constructing a theoretically robust framework that explicates the underlying mechanisms linking structured participation to identity outcomes. This approach aligns with contemporary calls for explanatory depth in social science research, emphasizing process-oriented theorizing over purely variance-based models (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010; Borsboom *et al.*, 2021).

The conceptual strategy integrates insights from social identity theory, identity development research, and PYD into a unified explanatory model. By combining these perspectives, the study moves beyond fragmented theoretical accounts and develops a multi-level framework that captures the dynamic interplay between individual, relational, and structural processes. In doing so, it responds to recent scholarly efforts to bridge micro-level psychological mechanisms with macro-level social structures (Lerner *et al.*, 2015; Vignoles *et al.*, 2021).

4.1 Conceptual Development Approach

The conceptual development is grounded in theory synthesis, a method that integrates multiple theoretical streams into a coherent framework. Social identity theory provides the foundational mechanism explaining how individuals derive meaning from group membership through categorization, identification, and norm internalization (Tajfel *et al.*, 1971; Hogg, 2001). In parallel, identity development theory contributes insights into how individuals construct and stabilize their sense of self through exploration, commitment, and narrative meaning-making (Marcia, 1966; McLean *et al.*, 2020).

The Positive Youth Development perspective complements these theories by highlighting the role of structured environments in shaping developmental outcomes such as competence, connection, and civic orientation (Lerner *et al.*, 2005; Bowers *et al.*, 2010). However, rather than treating these outcomes as endpoints, this study repositions them as consequences of underlying identity processes. This shift allows for a more integrated explanation of how developmental environments influence identity formation.

In addition to theory synthesis, the study adopts a mechanism-based approach to theorizing, which focuses on explaining how and why specific processes generate particular outcomes. Mechanism-based theorizing emphasizes causal pathways and interaction processes rather than isolated variables (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010). Within the context of youth organizations, this involves identifying how structured participation activates social categorization, norm internalization, emotional attachment, and identity reinforcement processes.

Insights from collective action research further inform this approach by highlighting the role of identification, perceived norms, and emotional engagement in motivating collective behavior (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008; Thomas *et al.*, 2020). These elements are incorporated as key mechanisms that bridge participation and identity outcomes.

Finally, the study employs integrative conceptual modeling, which involves defining core constructs, specifying their relationships, and organizing them into a coherent system. This approach allows for the development of a structured model that captures both the processes and outcomes of identity formation, while remaining sufficiently abstract to be applicable across different youth organizational contexts.

4.2 Analytical Strategy

The analytical strategy is based on a thematic synthesis of interdisciplinary literature that systematically identifies recurring concepts, patterns, and relationships across empirical and theoretical studies. Key themes, including participation, belonging, social interaction, identity internalization, and civic engagement, are extracted and organized into higher-order constructs. This process facilitates the consolidation of fragmented insights into a unified analytical structure (Ellemers *et al.*, 2002; Allen *et al.*, 2021).

Following thematic identification, the study employs cross-theoretical integration to connect constructs across different domains. For example, the concept of belonging from youth development literature is linked with identification processes from social identity theory, while civic engagement literature provides insight into behavioral outcomes. This integrative approach ensures that the framework captures both psychological mechanisms and social dynamics (Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Putnam, 2000).

A central component of the analytical strategy is the identification of causal pathways. Rather than treating constructs as independent variables, the study traces sequential relationships that explain how identity formation unfolds over time. Specifically, structured participation facilitates group interaction, which activates social categorization and norm internalization processes, leading to identity internalization and ultimately collective identity formation. This process-oriented perspective aligns with contemporary shifts toward mechanism-based explanations in social science (Borsboom *et al.*, 2021; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008).

In addition, the study incorporates multi-level analysis, recognizing that identity formation occurs through interactions across different levels of social reality. This approach allows the framework to capture how individual experiences, group dynamics, and organizational structures interact to produce identity outcomes.

Finally, conceptual abstraction is employed to generalize the framework beyond specific empirical contexts. By focusing on underlying mechanisms rather than context-specific details, the model is designed to be applicable across various youth organizations while remaining grounded in the scouting context. This enhances both the theoretical contribution and the potential for empirical validation.

4.3 Unit of Analysis

The proposed framework adopts a multi-level perspective by specifying three interconnected units of analysis: individual, group, and organization. This structure reflects the

understanding that identity formation is not confined to a single level but emerges from interactions across multiple layers of social reality.

At the individual (micro) level, the focus is on psychological processes such as identity exploration, internalization, motivation, and meaning-making (Marcia, 1966; Schwartz, 2001). These processes determine how individuals interpret and respond to group experiences. Contemporary perspectives further suggest that identity at this level is dynamic and continuously shaped by interaction and feedback (Crocetti, 2017; Syed & McLean, 2021).

At the group (meso) level, the scouting unit functions as the primary context for interaction. Group dynamics, including communication, cohesion, shared norms, and relational bonding, play a central role in shaping identity processes. Social identity theory emphasizes that these interactions are essential for developing a shared sense of belonging and a collective identity (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Reicher *et al.*, 2005).

At the organizational (macro) level, the broader scouting system provides the structural and cultural context that shapes participation and interaction. Organizational features such as program design, leadership structures, institutional values, and symbolic practices influence how identity processes are activated and sustained. Organizational identity research highlights that institutions play a crucial role in reinforcing shared meanings and guiding behavior (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam *et al.*, 2011).

Importantly, these levels are not independent but interact dynamically. Identity formation can be understood as an emergent process, where repeated interactions at the micro and meso levels give rise to higher-level constructs such as collective identity, which in turn shape individual behavior. This recursive dynamic aligns with multi-level and relational developmental systems perspectives (Kozlowski *et al.*, 2013; Lerner *et al.*, 2018).

5. Results: Conceptual Development

The core conceptual framework is developed by specifying the key constructs, underlying mechanisms, and multi-level dynamics that explain how participation in youth organizations contributes to collective identity formation. Drawing on social identity theory, identity development research, and youth development perspectives, the framework offers a mechanism-based explanation linking structured participation to identity internalization and civic outcomes. By explicitly modeling these causal processes, the framework extends beyond descriptive accounts toward a more theoretically grounded understanding of identity formation.

5.1 Core Constructs

The proposed framework is built upon five interrelated core constructs that collectively capture the process of collective identity formation within youth organizations.

Structured participation refers to the organized, rule-guided, and recurring involvement of youth in institutionalized activities. Unlike spontaneous interaction, structured participation provides consistent exposure to shared symbols, norms, and practices, creating a stable environment for identity-relevant experiences. Prior research demonstrates that structured activities enhance developmental outcomes by fostering continuity, predictability, and opportunities for social learning (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Lerner *et al.*, 2005). From a theoretical perspective, structured participation functions as the activation context that initiates identity-related processes.

Group interaction captures the relational and communicative processes that occur within the organizational setting, including collaboration, shared experiences, and interpersonal exchange. These interactions enable the transmission and negotiation of norms, values, and

meanings. Social identity theory emphasizes that identity emerges through interaction and mutual recognition within groups (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Ellemers *et al.*, 2002). Beyond mere contact, the quality and intensity of interaction determine the strength of identification and relational bonding (Haslam *et al.*, 2018).

Identity internalization refers to the process through which externally encountered group norms, values, and meanings become integrated into the individual's self-concept. This process involves both cognitive alignment and affective commitment, transforming participation from external engagement into internal psychological ownership (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel, 1974). Contemporary perspectives further suggest that internalization is reinforced through repeated interaction, narrative meaning-making, and social validation (McLean *et al.*, 2020; Syed & McLean, 2021).

Collective identity represents the emergent, shared sense of belonging and common purpose that develops among group members. It reflects the convergence of individual identities into a group-level construct that guides collective orientation and behavior. Collective identity is both a cognitive and affective phenomenon, encompassing shared meanings, emotional attachment, and perceived unity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). It functions as a coordinating mechanism that aligns individual actions with group goals.

Civic orientation denotes the behavioral manifestation of identity, reflecting individuals' inclination to engage in prosocial, community-oriented, and civic activities. This construct links internal identity processes to observable outcomes, demonstrating how identity formation translates into social contribution. Empirical studies indicate that identity and civic engagement are closely intertwined, with stronger identification leading to higher levels of participation and commitment (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

The table is introduced to consolidate conceptual clarity by systematically defining the core constructs and specifying their analytical roles within the framework. It ensures terminological precision and prevents ambiguity in how each construct operates within the model.

Table 1. Core Constructs and Their Roles in Collective Identity Formation

Construct	Definition	Analytical Role in the Model	Level of Analysis
Structured Participation	Organized, rule-guided, and recurring involvement in institutionalized activities	Activation context that initiates identity processes	Macro
Group Interaction	Relational and communicative processes among participants within the group	Relational mechanism enabling norm transmission	Meso
Identity Internalization	Process through which group norms and values become part of the self-concept	Core psychological transformation mechanism	Micro
Collective Identity	Shared sense of belonging and common purpose among group members	Emergent coordinating mechanism at group level	Meso
Civic Orientation	Inclination toward prosocial and community-oriented behavior	Behavioral manifestation of internalized identity	Micro

Source: Developed by the author

Table 1 strengthens the analytical clarity of the manuscript by explicitly defining each construct and situating it within the overall framework. By aligning definitions, roles, and levels of analysis, Table 1 enables readers to interpret the subsequent conceptual model with greater precision and reduces the risk of construct ambiguity or conceptual overlap.

Taken together, these constructs form a sequential and interdependent system in which participation initiates interaction, interaction facilitates internalization, and internalization gives rise to collective identity and behavioral outcomes.

5.2 5.2 Mechanisms of Identity Formation

To move beyond descriptive relationships, the framework specifies four key mechanisms that explain how identity formation unfolds. These mechanisms represent the causal processes linking the core constructs.

Social categorization serves as the entry mechanism through which individuals define themselves as members of a group. Participation in structured activities provides salient cues that trigger self-categorization, reducing uncertainty and establishing a shared frame of reference (Tajfel *et al.*, 1971; Hogg, 2001). This process transforms individuals from isolated actors into group members, enabling subsequent identity processes.

Norm internalization follows categorization and involves the adoption of group norms and values as personal standards. Through repeated interaction, norms are communicated, reinforced, and negotiated within the group context (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Terry & Hogg, 1996). Social feedback and peer influence further strengthen this process, aligning individual behavior with collective expectations (Allen *et al.*, 2021). This mechanism explains how external structures become internal guides for behavior.

Emotional attachment captures the affective dimension of identity formation. As individuals engage in shared experiences, they develop emotional bonds with the group, enhancing commitment and identification. Research shows that emotional attachment is a critical determinant of sustained engagement, well-being, and group loyalty (Haslam *et al.*, 2009; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2018). This mechanism ensures that identity is not only cognitively accepted but also emotionally anchored.

Identity reinforcement represents the stabilization process through which identity becomes durable over time. Repeated participation, recognition, and positive feedback reinforce the alignment between individual and group identity. This creates a feedback loop in which identity is continuously reproduced and strengthened (Drury & Reicher, 2005; Thomas *et al.*, 2020). Identity reinforcement transforms temporary alignment into long-term commitment.

This figure isolates the internal causal architecture that drives identity formation by unpacking the key mechanisms linking participation to identity outcomes. It shifts the analytical focus from observable stages to the underlying processes that generate and sustain identity over time.

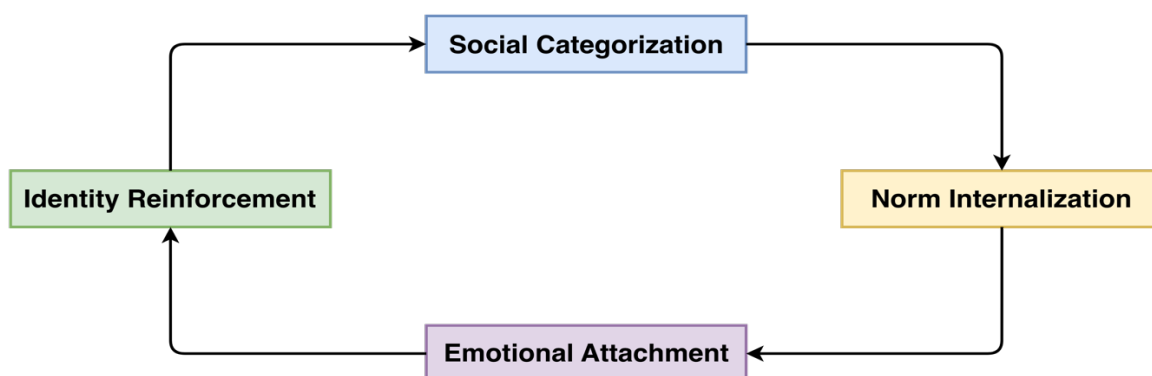


Figure 1. Core Mechanisms of Identity Formation in Youth Organizations

Source: Developed by the author

As illustrated in Figure 1, identity formation is driven by four interdependent mechanisms that operate in a recursive cycle rather than a linear sequence. Social categorization initiates group-based self-definition, which enables norm internalization; this is deepened through

emotional attachment and stabilized via identity reinforcement. Figure 1 strengthens the theoretical contribution by explicitly revealing the causal engine underlying the broader conceptual model, clarifying how identity is continuously constructed and sustained through interacting processes.

Importantly, these mechanisms operate in a sequential yet recursive manner, where each process reinforces and amplifies the others. This dynamic aligns with mechanism-based and relational systems perspectives, which emphasize that social outcomes emerge from continuous interaction between processes rather than linear causality (Lerner *et al.*, 2018; Borsboom *et al.*, 2021).

5.3 Multi-level Dynamics

The conceptual framework operates across three interconnected levels, namely micro, meso, and macro, capturing the complexity of identity formation as an emergent phenomenon.

At the micro level, identity formation is shaped by individual psychological processes, including perception, motivation, interpretation, and internalization. These processes determine how individuals respond to group experiences and whether they adopt group norms as part of their self-concept (Marcia, 1966; Crocetti, 2017). Individual differences influence the depth and speed of identity internalization.

At the meso level, group dynamics provide the immediate context for interaction. Shared activities, communication patterns, and relational bonding influence how identity processes unfold. Group cohesion and mutual recognition strengthen identification and facilitate collective identity formation (Reicher *et al.*, 2005; Hogg, 2001).

At the macro level, organizational structures shape the conditions under which participation and interaction occur. Program design, leadership, institutional values, and symbolic practices influence the consistency and intensity of identity processes. Organizational contexts provide the structural scaffolding that enables identity formation to occur systematically (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam *et al.*, 2011).

These levels interact dynamically through processes of cross-level emergence, where higher-level constructs such as collective identity arise from repeated lower-level interactions while simultaneously shaping individual behavior (Kozlowski *et al.*, 2013; Aguinis & Glavas, 2019). This recursive dynamic highlights the systemic nature of identity formation.

This figure conceptualizes identity formation as a multi-level system in which processes unfold across interconnected layers of social reality. It highlights how individual, group, and organizational dynamics interact to produce identity as an emergent phenomenon rather than a single-level outcome.

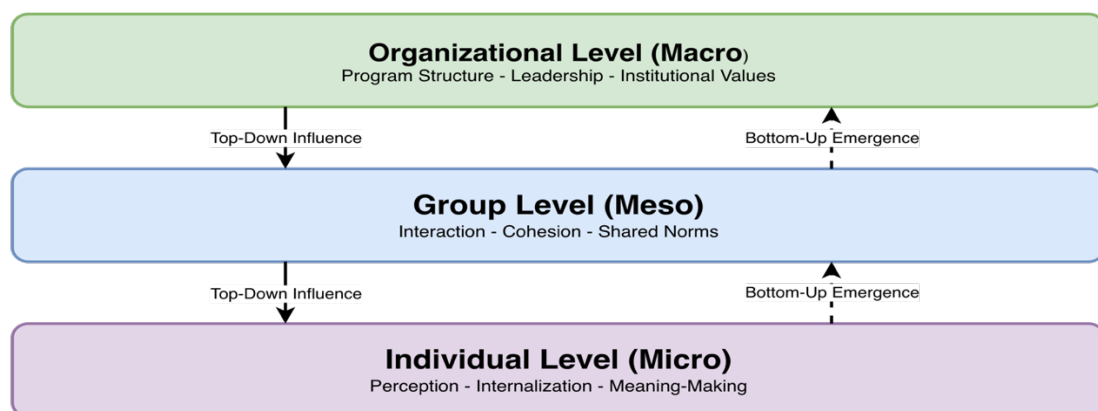


Figure 2. Multi-level Dynamics of Collective Identity Formation
Source: Author's conceptualization

Figure 2 reorients the analysis toward the multi-level structure underlying identity formation by demonstrating how processes at the individual, group, and organizational levels interact dynamically. It shows that top-down influences (e.g., institutional structures and leadership) shape interaction and internalization, while bottom-up processes generate emergent collective identity that feeds back into higher levels. By making these cross-level dynamics explicit, Figure 2 strengthens the argument that identity formation is an emergent and recursive system rather than a linear or isolated process.

5.4 Boundary Conditions

While the framework provides a general explanation of identity formation, several boundary conditions influence the strength and direction of the proposed relationships.

First, digital versus offline participation introduces variation in interaction quality and identity processes. Digital environments expand opportunities for engagement but may alter the depth of social interaction and norm transmission. Studies suggest that digital participation can both enhance and constrain identity formation depending on its integration with offline experiences (Nesi *et al.*, 2022; Wray-Lake *et al.*, 2017).

Second, cultural context shapes the meaning of group membership and identity. Cultural values influence how individuals interpret participation and internalize norms, leading to variation in identity outcomes across settings (Umaña-Taylor *et al.*, 2014; Schwartz *et al.*, 2011).

Third, leadership influence plays a central role in facilitating identity processes. Leaders who embody group values and foster shared purpose strengthen identification and cohesion. A social identity approach to leadership emphasizes that effective leaders actively construct and reinforce collective identity (Reicher *et al.*, 2005).

These boundary conditions ensure that the framework remains context-sensitive while maintaining theoretical coherence. They also provide avenues for future empirical research to test variations in identity formation processes.

6. Conceptual Model and Propositions

Extending the preceding conceptual development, this study formalizes the relationships between constructs into a coherent and testable model. It elucidates how structured participation in youth organizations activates identity-related mechanisms that ultimately foster collective identity formation and civic outcomes. By articulating directional linkages and underlying processes, the framework offers a mechanism-based explanation that integrates social identity theory with youth development perspectives.

6.1 Conceptual Model Description

The proposed conceptual model conceptualizes identity formation as a sequential and process-oriented phenomenon that unfolds through interconnected stages. At its foundation, structured participation serves as the enabling condition that embeds individuals within an organized social environment. Through repeated engagement in shared activities, participants are exposed to common symbols, norms, and values, which increase the salience of group membership and create the conditions necessary for identity-relevant processes to emerge (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Lerner *et al.*, 2005).

Within this context, group interaction functions as the primary relational mechanism through which individuals engage with peers and leaders. Through communication, collaboration, and shared experiences, participants encounter, interpret, and negotiate group norms. These interactions foster relational bonding and provide the social context in which identity-related processes begin to take shape (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Ellemers *et al.*, 2002). The quality

and intensity of these interactions play a critical role in determining the extent to which individuals move beyond surface-level participation toward deeper psychological engagement.

As interaction becomes more sustained and meaningful, individuals undergo processes of identity internalization. This stage reflects the transformation of externally encountered norms and values into internal components of the self-concept. Identity internalization involves both cognitive alignment with group values and affective commitment to group membership, resulting in a sense of psychological ownership (Stets & Burke, 2000; McLean *et al.*, 2020). Through repeated interaction, social validation, and narrative meaning-making, individuals increasingly integrate group identity into their personal identity.

At a more aggregated level, collective identity emerges as a shared sense of belonging and common purpose among group members. This construct represents the convergence of individual identity processes into a group-level phenomenon characterized by mutual recognition, emotional attachment, and shared meaning (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008). Collective identity serves as a coordinating mechanism that aligns individual behavior with group goals and reinforces group cohesion.

Finally, civic orientation captures the behavioral implications of identity formation. Individuals who strongly identify with the group are more likely to engage in prosocial, community-oriented, and civic activities. This reflects the translation of internalized identity into observable behavior, linking psychological processes to social outcomes (Flanagan & Levine, 2010).

Importantly, this process is not strictly linear but dynamic and recursive, with feedback loops reinforcing identity over time. Repeated participation and interaction strengthen identity internalization, which in turn deepens engagement and commitment. Moreover, the entire process is embedded within a multi-level system in which individual experiences, group dynamics, and organizational structures interact continuously.

The figure articulates the core process through which collective identity emerges from structured participation. It captures the sequential transformation from external engagement to internalized identity and ultimately to behavioral outcomes, emphasizing the mechanism-driven logic of the model.

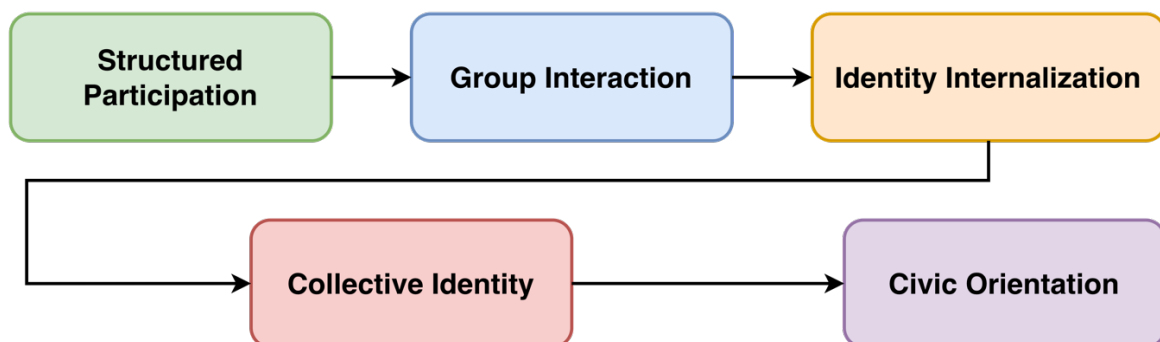


Figure 3. Conceptual Process Model of Collective Identity Formation in Youth Organizations
Source: Author's conceptualization

The framework articulated in Figure 3 clarifies how identity formation unfolds as a sequential and mechanism-driven process. It shows that structured participation initiates group interaction, which enables identity internalization, leading to the emergence of collective identity and its translation into civic orientation. By making these causal linkages explicit, Figure 3 strengthens the article's core argument that identity functions as the central mechanism connecting participation to developmental and behavioral outcomes.

6.2 Propositions

Based on the conceptual model, the following propositions articulate the relationships between constructs in a theoretically grounded and empirically testable manner.

Proposition 1

Structured participation enhances the salience of group membership by facilitating social categorization processes.

Structured participation exposes individuals to shared norms, values, and symbolic practices, increasing the likelihood that they perceive themselves as members of a collective. This repeated exposure strengthens the salience of group identity and provides the cognitive basis for self-categorization (Tajfel, 1974; Hogg, 2001). Participation that is consistent and meaningful is particularly effective in reinforcing this process (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Haslam *et al.*, 2009).

Proposition 2

Group interaction strengthens identity internalization through norm alignment and relational bonding.

Through ongoing interaction with peers and leaders, individuals encounter and internalize group norms. Communication, shared experiences, and social feedback facilitate alignment between individual attitudes and group expectations. At the same time, relational bonding enhances emotional commitment, reinforcing the internalization process (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Terry & Hogg, 1996; Allen *et al.*, 2021).

Proposition 3

Identity internalization contributes to the emergence of collective identity through shared meaning and mutual recognition.

As individuals incorporate group values into their self-concept, a shared identity begins to form at the group level. This collective identity is characterized by a sense of belonging, common purpose, and mutual recognition among members (Simon & Klandermans, 2001; Stets & Burke, 2000). Sustained interaction further reinforces this shared identity (Drury & Reicher, 2005).

Proposition 4

Collective identity positively influences civic orientation and prosocial behavior.

Individuals who strongly identify with a group are more likely to act in ways that reflect group values and goals. Collective identity provides both a normative framework and motivational basis for engagement in civic and prosocial activities (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008; Flanagan & Levine, 2010). This relationship highlights the role of identity as a driver of socially oriented behavior.

Proposition 5

Organizational structure and leadership moderate the relationship between participation and identity formation.

The effectiveness of identity formation processes depends on the broader organizational context. Structured programs, clear value systems, and supportive leadership enhance the consistency and intensity of identity-related processes. Leaders who embody group values and foster shared purpose strengthen identification and cohesion (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam *et al.*, 2011; Reicher *et al.*, 2005).

Proposition 6

Digital engagement moderates the relationship between interaction and identity internalization.

Digital environments introduce new forms of interaction that influence identity formation processes. While digital platforms can enhance communication and expand participation, they may also alter the depth of interaction and norm transmission. The impact of digital engagement depends on its integration with offline experiences and its ability to support meaningful social interaction (Nesi *et al.*, 2022; Wray-Lake *et al.*, 2017).

The table organizes the formal propositions into a structured analytical format, making explicit the relationships between constructs, underlying mechanisms, and their theoretical implications. This enhances clarity by translating narrative propositions into a systematic framework that is easier to evaluate and interpret.

Table 2. Propositions and Mechanism-Based Relationships in Collective Identity Formation

Proposition & Relationship Specification	Underlying Mechanism(s)	Theoretical Logic
P1 Structured Participation → Social Categorization	Social categorization	Repeated exposure to shared symbols and practices increases group salience and triggers self-categorization
P2 Group Interaction → Identity Internalization	Norm internalization; Emotional attachment	Interaction facilitates norm alignment and relational bonding, enabling internalization
P3 Identity Internalization → Collective Identity	Identity reinforcement	Internalized values converge into shared meaning and mutual recognition
P4 Collective Identity → Civic Orientation	Normative alignment; Motivational activation	Shared identity provides behavioral guidance and motivation for prosocial action
P5 Organizational Structure → Moderates (Participation → Identity Formation)	Structural reinforcement	Institutional design and leadership strengthen or weaken identity processes
P6 Digital Engagement → Moderates (Interaction → Internalization)	Interaction modulation	Digital contexts alter interaction quality and norm transmission dynamics

Source: Developed by the author

By structuring the theoretical relationships in a compact format, Table 2 clarifies how each proposition is grounded in specific mechanisms and how these mechanisms collectively support the overall model. Table 2 therefore strengthens the manuscript’s analytical rigor by making the causal logic explicit and systematically organized.

7. Discussion

This discussion interprets the proposed conceptual model by situating it within broader theoretical debates on identity, youth development, and organizational participation. Rather than reiterating prior arguments, it engages in a dialogic exchange with existing literature, demonstrating how the framework both consolidates and extends current knowledge. By integrating previously fragmented perspectives into a mechanism-based explanation, the model offers a more coherent account of how collective identity emerges within youth organizations.

7.1 Theoretical Contributions

The first major contribution of this study lies in the integration of social identity theory and PYD into a unified explanatory framework. While social identity theory explains how individuals define themselves through group membership (Tajfel *et al.*, 1971; Hogg, 2001), and PYD emphasizes developmental outcomes such as competence and connection (Lerner

et al., 2005), these perspectives have largely been treated as parallel rather than interconnected. The present framework bridges this divide by demonstrating that developmental outcomes are not merely the result of participation, but emerge through identity-based mechanisms that link participation to internal psychological transformation.

Second, this study advances a mechanism-based explanation of identity formation, addressing a key limitation in the existing literature. Prior research has largely emphasized relationships between variables, such as participation and engagement, without clearly explicating the processes that connect them. By identifying mechanisms including social categorization, norm internalization, emotional attachment, and identity reinforcement, the model redirects attention from descriptive associations to underlying causal processes. This contribution is consistent with broader calls in the social sciences for process-oriented theorizing that emphasizes how outcomes are generated rather than merely observed (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010; Borsboom *et al.*, 2021).

Third, the framework contributes a multi-level theoretical advancement by integrating micro-level psychological processes, meso-level group dynamics, and macro-level organizational structures. Identity formation is conceptualized as an emergent phenomenon arising from interactions across these levels. This perspective aligns with relational developmental systems theory, which emphasizes the interconnectedness of developmental processes (Lerner *et al.*, 2018), while also extending organizational identity research by embedding it within youth development contexts (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Haslam *et al.*, 2011). Importantly, the framework highlights cross-level dynamics, where collective identity both emerges from and shapes individual behavior.

Finally, the model contributes to ongoing theoretical discussions by repositioning identity as a central mechanism rather than an outcome. In many existing frameworks, identity is treated as a secondary variable or implicit construct. In contrast, this study positions identity as the key explanatory link between participation and behavioral outcomes, thereby providing a more precise and theoretically grounded account of youth development processes.

7.2 Connection to Existing Literature

The proposed framework extends foundational contributions in social identity theory by applying them to youth organizational contexts in a more explicit and mechanism-driven manner. While earlier work has established the importance of categorization and identification (Tajfel, 1974; Hogg, 2001), this study demonstrates how these processes are activated and sustained through structured participation and interaction. In doing so, it responds to recent efforts to contextualize social identity theory within dynamic and real-world environments.

In addition, the framework bridges identity theory with civic engagement literature. Previous studies have shown that collective identity is a key driver of participation in civic and prosocial activities (van Zomeren *et al.*, 2008; Flanagan & Levine, 2010). However, the pathways linking identity formation to civic outcomes have often remained implicit. By articulating a process that connects participation, interaction, identity internalization, and behavior, this study provides a clearer explanation of how civic orientation emerges from identity processes.

The framework also aligns with contemporary research emphasizing the importance of belonging and relational dynamics in youth development. Recent studies highlight that a sense of belonging is a fundamental psychological need that influences engagement and well-being (Allen *et al.*, 2021; Walton & Brady, 2020). By incorporating relational bonding and emotional attachment as core mechanisms, the model captures the affective dimension of identity formation, which is often underemphasized in purely cognitive accounts.

Furthermore, the inclusion of digital engagement as a boundary condition reflects emerging trends in youth identity research. Contemporary scholarship suggests that identity formation increasingly occurs within hybrid environments that combine offline and online interaction (Nesi *et al.*, 2022). By integrating this dimension into the model, the framework remains relevant to evolving forms of participation and interaction.

At a broader level, the study responds to critiques of theoretical fragmentation in identity research. Recent reviews highlight that identity-related constructs are often operationalized inconsistently across disciplines, limiting cumulative theory development (Vignoles *et al.*, 2021). By offering a unified, mechanism-based framework, this study contributes to greater conceptual clarity and integration.

7.3 Implications for Youth Organizations

The findings of this study have significant implications for the design and implementation of youth programs, particularly in scouting and similar organizational contexts. First, the framework suggests that youth programs should be intentionally designed to facilitate identity formation, rather than focusing solely on skill acquisition or participation rates. Structured participation should incorporate meaningful rituals, shared symbols, and value-driven activities that enhance group identification and belonging.

Second, the model highlights the importance of interaction quality. Programs should create environments that promote collaboration, communication, and peer bonding, as these relational processes are central to identity internalization. Mentoring relationships and peer support systems can further strengthen these processes by providing consistent reinforcement and feedback (DuBois *et al.*, 2011; Rhodes & DuBois, 2008).

Third, leadership development emerges as a critical factor. Leaders play a central role in shaping group norms, reinforcing shared values, and fostering a sense of collective identity. A social identity approach to leadership suggests that effective leaders are those who embody and promote group identity, thereby strengthening cohesion and engagement (Reicher *et al.*, 2005).

Importantly, the framework implies that program effectiveness should be evaluated not only in terms of observable outcomes but also in terms of identity-related processes, such as the extent to which participants internalize group values and develop a sense of belonging. These processes are critical predictors of long-term engagement and behavioral consistency.

7.4 Future Research Directions

The proposed framework opens several avenues for future research. First, empirical validation of the model is essential. Quantitative studies can examine the relationships between constructs using methods such as structural equation modeling, while qualitative approaches can provide deeper insights into the underlying mechanisms.

Second, future research should explore cross-cultural variations in identity formation processes. Cultural contexts influence how individuals interpret group membership and internalize norms, and comparative studies can enhance the generalizability of the framework (Umaña-Taylor *et al.*, 2014; Schwartz *et al.*, 2011).

Third, there is a need to further investigate the role of digital environments in shaping identity formation. As youth participation increasingly occurs in hybrid formats, understanding how online and offline interactions interact becomes critical. Future studies can examine how digital tools can be designed to support meaningful interaction and identity development.

Finally, methodological advancements such as longitudinal designs and multi-level modeling can provide deeper insights into the dynamic and recursive nature of identity

formation processes (Curran *et al.*, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2023). Such approaches would allow researchers to capture how identity evolves over time and across contexts.

8. Conclusion

This article develops a theory-driven conceptual framework to explain how collective identity is formed within youth organizations, with a particular focus on scouting as a structured, value-oriented context. By integrating social identity theory, identity development research, and Positive Youth Development perspectives, the study advances a mechanism-based model that explicates how structured participation and group interaction translate into identity internalization and, ultimately, civic orientation.

The primary contribution of this study lies in shifting the analytical focus from outcomes to underlying processes. Rather than treating participation as a direct predictor of developmental outcomes, the proposed framework positions identity as the central explanatory mechanism that links engagement to behavior. In doing so, the study addresses fragmentation in existing literature by offering a coherent, multi-level model that connects individual psychological processes, group dynamics, and organizational structures within a unified explanatory system.

The framework also contributes to theory by demonstrating that collective identity emerges through identifiable and sequential mechanisms, including social categorization, norm internalization, emotional attachment, and identity reinforcement. These mechanisms provide a clearer understanding of how identity is constructed, stabilized, and translated into action. By articulating these processes, the study responds to calls for more mechanism-based and process-oriented theorizing in social and developmental sciences.

From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of designing youth programs that intentionally foster identity formation. Structured participation alone is insufficient; meaningful interaction, relational bonding, and value-based leadership are essential in transforming participation into identity and long-term engagement. This insight has direct implications for youth organizations seeking to enhance both developmental outcomes and civic impact.

Despite its contributions, this study is conceptual in nature and therefore requires empirical validation. Future research is encouraged to test the proposed model across different contexts, examine variations in identity formation processes, and explore the role of emerging digital environments. Longitudinal and multi-level research designs may be particularly valuable in capturing the dynamic and recursive nature of identity development.

In conclusion, this article positions youth organizations not merely as developmental settings but as identity-forming systems. By advancing a mechanism-based understanding of how participation leads to identity and behavior, the study provides a foundation for both theoretical advancement and practical innovation. It opens new pathways for research that more precisely explains how young individuals develop a sense of belonging, purpose, and civic responsibility in an increasingly complex social world.

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