

## Fourth Generation Wars and the Cultural Identity Crisis among University Students

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### Abstract

Fourth Generation Wars have received growing attention in recent years, particularly because major powers employ them as an indirect means of dominance. Unlike traditional military confrontations, these wars exploit tools such as globalization and cultural invasion to weaken cultural identity—especially among youth. Social media platforms have become the primary weapon in this context. This study investigates the impact of Fourth Generation Wars on university students at Setif 2 University in Algeria. A descriptive methodology was applied using a structured questionnaire distributed to 70 Master's students in the Department of Media and Communication. The results indicate that students who spend more than two hours daily on social media often engage positively with posts hostile to the state, reflecting a degree of trust in such content. Furthermore, many students frequently combine Arabic with other languages in their online interactions, thereby undermining Arabic's status as a central element of cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Crisis, cultural identity, Fourth Generation Wars, new media, social media, university students

### الملخص

تُعد حروب الجيل الرابع من الأساليب التي تعتمد其a الدول الكبرى للسيطرة على باقي دول العالم، بهدف إضعاف الهوية الثقافية، ولا سيما لدى فئة الشباب، حيث جرى توظيف شبكات التواصل الاجتماعي كوسيلة لتحقيق ذلك. وعليه، تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية إلى الوقوف على مدى تأثير حروب الجيل الرابع على الشباب الجامعي بجامعة سطيف 02، وتحديداً طلبة قسم علوم الإعلام والاتصال، مستوى السنة الثانية ماستر، والبالغ عددهم (70) مفردة بوصفهم عينة تمثيلية. وقد اعتمدت الدراسة على المنهج الوصفي، مع استخدام أداة الاستبيان، وتوصلت إلى جملة من النتائج، أبرزها أن أغلب الشباب المبحوثين صرّحوا بقضاء مدة تتجاوز الساعتين في تصفح موقع التواصل الاجتماعي، إضافة إلى أن معظم تعليقاتهم تتسم بالمزج بين اللغة العربية واللغات الأجنبية، وهو ما يسيء إلى مكانة اللغة العربية باعتبارها أحد رموز الهوية الثقافية.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** حروب الجيل الرابع، الأزمة، الهوية الثقافية، الطالب الجامعي، موقع التواصل الاجتماعي.

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## Introduction

In recent years, interest in Fourth Generation Wars has intensified. These conflicts have taken on new forms and adopted new strategies in parallel with rapid technological development, particularly in the fields of communication and information. Unlike traditional wars, which primarily target military objectives, 4GW extends its scope to the societal domain. Its strategy is based on weakening the state from within, by targeting the civilian fabric rather than engaging in direct armed confrontation with the official military.

Historically, the first generation of wars relied on dense formations to maximize firepower. The second generation shifted to a combination of fire and maneuver, emphasizing heavy firepower and operational planning rather than sheer workforce. The third generation represented the "blitzkrieg" model, using speed, maneuver, and firepower to achieve decisive results while avoiding prolonged confrontation.

The fourth generation, however, departs from conventional methods. It relies less on direct military power and more on what is termed "smart power"—a combination of soft power (culture, information, media, ideology) and hard power (coercion, threats, destabilization). The lines between war and politics and between the military and civilian domains become blurred, creating a landscape of uncertainty for national security.

Tactics of Fourth Generation Wars are heavily psychological. They are executed through trained individuals or groups whose mission is to spread instability, disorder, and disinformation. These tactics include cultural penetration, rumor campaigns, terrorist acts, and the systematic destruction of morale. The ultimate goal is to break the will of the target society, undermine its institutions, and generate widespread chaos and fear. Such conditions may then invite external intervention, or keep the state internally preoccupied in ways that serve regional or international interests.

In the Algerian context, 4GW poses serious risks. Disinformation, rumors, and fabricated news spread through the media ecosystem aim to weaken social cohesion and erode national identity. The youth, as the most dynamic and influential social group, are especially vulnerable. If they are successfully manipulated, the entire state's resilience is threatened. Fourth Generation Wars, fought "from a distance," push societies toward self-destruction by fueling internal division and animosity.

Based on this background, the central research question is posed:

To what extent do Fourth Generation Wars affect the cultural identity of university students?

To address this central question, the study is structured around the following themes:

1. The concept and characteristics of Fourth Generation Wars.

2. Cultural identity and the challenges of new media.
3. The specific effects of 4GW on the cultural identity of university students.

## Literature Review

### *The Nature of Fourth-Generation Wars*

It is undeniable that states possessing advanced technologies and communication tools use them against their adversaries. Instead of waging conventional wars that cost lives and resources, they increasingly engage in electronic wars aimed at weakening or even collapsing the target state. These wars involve cyberattacks against institutions, the exploitation of local agents to spread rumors and divisions, and other destabilizing practices. Fourth Generation Wars represent one of the most developed forms of this new conflict.

### *Definition of Fourth Generation Wars*

The Political Encyclopedia defines Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW) as an asymmetric war—a conflict not fought between conventional armies, nor necessarily in confrontation between states. Instead, a wide range of tools and methods are mobilized to weaken and exhaust the enemy state, forcing it to comply with external agendas without a single soldier crossing its borders (Zaher et al., 2011, p. 22).

Military experts argue that 4GW is primarily an American innovation, developed by the U.S. military after the events of September 11, 2001, to address global non-state threats. Such wars involve professional organizations and hidden cells capable of targeting vital national interests worldwide (Chakrabarti, 2010, p. 292). General Majid al-Qaisi stresses that 4GW is less about the decentralization of combat and more about the evolution of weapon systems themselves (Boukhal, 2013).

In general terms, 4GW can be defined as a type of conflict that relies on rumors, sectarian divisions, information manipulation, and psychological operations through media and the internet. It aims to destabilize the target society internally, disrupt cohesion, and cultivate hostile attitudes among youth.

### *Characteristics of Fourth Generation Wars*

Fourth Generation Wars have distinct features. They influence populations by exploiting weaknesses and undermining loyalty to the nation-state. Citizens are persuaded to question the legitimacy of their state, paving the way for groups with cross-border affiliations. They depend heavily on mercenaries rather than national armies. These mercenaries, often hired by private military companies such as Blackwater, are less costly than maintaining regular armies. For instance, nearly 600 such companies were active in Iraq during the U.S. invasion, and France similarly employed hired forces in Africa. They empower sub-state actors. Insurgent organizations can gain influence comparable to, or greater than, that of professional national armies.

### *Main Features*

Unlike previous generations of war, which were largely confined to military operations, 4GW affects nearly every domain of society—economic, cultural, educational, political, and social.

- The boundary between war and peace is blurred.
- The conflict is not confined to geographic battlefields. It unfolds in the “depths” of society, targeting morale, traditions, culture, and state institutions.
- Both military and civilian actors are involved simultaneously, and the distinction between them becomes irrelevant.
- Large traditional targets (airports, command centers, central installations) lose strategic significance, as the true battleground is societal stability.

### *Specific Properties of 4GW*

Compared with conventional wars, Fourth Generation Wars have unique objectives and methods:

- **Goals:** Traditional wars sought military victory by destroying enemy forces and compelling concessions. In asymmetric 4GW conflicts, the weaker side cannot achieve such military success, so the struggle focuses on political gains (Singh, 2009, p. 32).
- **Means and tools:** They employ diverse instruments—security, economic, ideological, media, and cultural. Sometimes highly advanced technologies are used, and in other cases, rudimentary tools are mobilized.
- **Theater of operations:** Unlike traditional wars with defined battlefields, 4GW has no fixed geography. It can simultaneously erupt across multiple spheres of society (Moussa, 2015, p. 40).
- **Duration:** Traditional wars are limited in time, but 4GW often lasts decades. A key example is the global “War on Terror” led by the United States after 2001.

Further distinguishing features include:

- **Social:** Weakening of the state in favor of fragmented loyalties, and the erosion of social cohesion.
- **Political:** Forcing states to change strategies through propaganda, psychological pressure, and the rise of new identity-based groups.
- **Military:** Operations transcend borders; terrorism becomes the most common instrument to break the will of societies and dominate their political systems.

## ***Cultural Identity and New Media***

### ***Foundations and Levels of Cultural Identity***

Identity is not static—it evolves through intercultural encounters. However, societies often rely on cultural identity as a shield to preserve their threatened heritage (Boulchaab, 2016). French sociologist Vinsonneau (n.d.) argues that culture is both a product and a resource for identity development. It provides models for sharing values, shaping social belonging, and guiding life choices.

According to Zagħwa (2010), the core components of cultural identity include human beings, balance of personality, faith and belief, and values. While the key elements are languages, religion, history, homeland, nation, and state. He added that there are levels of cultural identity which include individual identity, collective identity, and national identity.

### ***Globalization and Cultural Identity***

Cultural globalization refers to efforts to mold diverse peoples into a unified model, shaped mainly by American thought. Satellite television, the internet, and global entertainment industries are powerful tools in this process. The aim is to detach societies from their heritage and replace it with a consumer-oriented global culture. Moroccan philosopher Abed al-Jabri distinguishes between globalization and universalism:

- Globalization represents a will to dominate, often suppressing particular identities.
- Universalism seeks genuine dialogue and exchange, elevating cultural particularities to a global level.

In this light, cultural identity is what distinguishes one society from another. Although subject to historical transformations, it remains a key pillar of continuity. Globalization, however, exposes youth—especially university students—to cultural homogenization. Through both traditional and new media, Western cultural models are diffused at the expense of local traditions.

### **Methodology**

The nature of the subject and its objectives require a research approach that provides accurate insights into the phenomenon under study. The methodology serves as the path the researcher follows to explore a problem, relying on rules and procedures to answer questions and test hypotheses.

This study employs a descriptive method that aims to observe, describe, and analyze phenomena as they exist in reality. It is not limited to description alone but also interprets

events, opinions, and associated variables to arrive at meaningful conclusions that may guide correction or improvement (Ben Mersli, 2007, p. 58).

Accordingly, this research describes and diagnoses Fourth Generation Wars from multiple perspectives, focusing on their impact on students' cultural identity.

### ***Objectives of the Study***

- To identify changes in the cultural identity of university students resulting from the influence of social media.
- To raise awareness among students about the dangers of 4GW and their impact on social cohesion.
- To draw the attention of media institutions to the need for accuracy and verification of information.

### ***Importance of the Study***

The importance of this study lies in its attempt to shed light on the effects of 4GW on youth identity. Since the media plays a central role in spreading rumors and disinformation, it becomes crucial to understand how such influences threaten cultural belonging.

### ***Research Instruments***

A questionnaire was used, consisting of a series of structured questions on specific topics. It was distributed directly to the selected students to gather accurate responses.

### ***Participants***

The research population consisted of Master's students specializing in Mass Communication and Public Relations at Setif 2 University. The total population was 346 students. Using purposive sampling, 20% of the population was selected, resulting in 70 distributed questionnaires. After collection, 60 valid questionnaires were obtained, while others were either not returned or incomplete.

## **Results**

This section presents the survey findings and the analysis of the data. It is divided into three parts:

1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.
2. Students' relationship with social media (as a core tool of 4GW).
3. The influence of social media content on cultural identity.

### ***Demographic Characteristics of the Sample***

Table 1. *Distribution of the sample by gender*

the impact of social media on cultural identity	Frequency	Percentage %
greatly affect	259	75
moderate effect	69	20
completely not affect	18	3
Total	346	100

The results show that females represent the majority of students in the Department of Media and Communication (88.44%), while males account for only 11.56%. This reflects broader demographic trends in Algerian universities, where females are often more represented in humanities and social sciences.

Table 2. *Distribution of the sample by age*

Type	Frequency	Percentage %
From 23 to 26	294	85
From 26 to 29	35	10
From 29 to 32	17	5
Total	346	100

### ***Students' Relationship with Social Media***

Table 3. *Duration of social media use*

university student's use of social media duration	Frequency	Percentage %
Less than one year	11	3
From 1 to 3 years	24	7
More than 3 years	311	90
Total	346	100

The overwhelming majority (90%) have been using social media for more than three years, showing the deep integration of these platforms in students' daily lives.

Table 4. *Most commonly used platforms*

The most popular social networking application	Frequency	Percentage %
Facebook	324	94
You tube	7	2
WhatsApp	7	2
Instagram	3	1
Tik Tok	3	1
Total	346	100

Facebook dominates usage, attracting 94% of respondents, while other platforms (YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok) are far less significant.

Table 5. *Daily time spent on social media*

Daily use of social media	Frequency	Percentage %
Less than 1 hour	34	10
From 1 to 2 hours	111	32
From 2 to 3 hours	104	30
More than 3 hours	97	28
Total	346	100

Most students spend between 1 and 3 hours daily on social media, while 28% exceed 3 hours, highlighting significant exposure.

### **Reasons for Using social media**

Table 6. *Main purposes of social media use*

Reasons of using social networks (media)	Frequency	Percentage %
For communicating with others	208	60
To increase information and knowledge	86	25
For fun and entertainment	35	10
Electronic marketing	17	5
Total	346	100

Most students (60%) use social media primarily to maintain communication, followed by seeking information (25%). Entertainment and shopping represent minor motives.

### **Impact on Cultural Identity**

Table 7. *Influence of social media on cultural identity*

the impact of social media on cultural identity	Frequency	Percentage %
greatly affect	259	75
moderate effect	69	20
completely not affect	18	3
Total	346	100

Three-quarters of students believe social media strongly influences cultural identity, while only a small minority (5%) think it has no impact.

Table 8. *Credibility of news on social media*

Information published on social media	Frequency	Percentage %
Honest news	121	35
False news	225	65
Total	346	100

A majority (65%) perceive news on social media as false or misleading, though 35% still trust it, showing the danger of disinformation in shaping identity.

## Impact on Religion

Table 9. *Influence of social media content on religion*

the impact of the social media contents on religion	Frequency	Percentage %
Providing religious advice and guidance	138	40
Support for the Freemasonry movement	52	15
Support the Islamic religion	104	30
Increased religious intolerance	52	15
Total	346	100

While 40% believe social media provides beneficial religious advice and 30% say it reinforces Islamic values, 15% recognize its role in spreading extremist or Masonic ideologies.

## Impact on Language

Table 10. *Language used by students on social media*

Language used in social media	Frequency	Percentage %
Standard Arabic	0	0
Slang	242	70
Foreign language	35	10
A mixture of Arabic and foreign language	45	13
Specific language for social media	24	7
Total	346	100

Dialectal Arabic dominates (70%), while no students use Modern Standard Arabic. Mixing with foreign languages (13%) and slang (7%) reflect erosion of Arabic as a symbol of cultural identity.

## Impact on National Identity

Table 11. *Contribution of social media to national identity*

The social media role in preserving national identity	Frequency	Percentage %
Introducing the various glorious revolutionary dates	87	25%
Work to fabricate social, political and economic problems	138	40%
mainstream system support	86	25%
opposition to the prevailing system	35	10%
Total	346	100%

Fourty percent of students see social media as fueling problems and crises, while only 25% believe it contributes positively to national pride.

## Discussion

The results of this study confirm that social media—one of the key mechanisms of Fourth Generation Wars—exerts a profound influence on students' cultural identity.

- The dominance of Facebook (94% usage) makes it a powerful vehicle for spreading cultural norms, ideologies, and disinformation.

- The amount of time spent online (often more than two hours daily) exposes students to hostile narratives that weaken trust in national institutions.
- The use of dialect and foreign languages at the expense of Modern Standard Arabic highlights a gradual erosion of linguistic heritage, a cornerstone of identity.
- The ambiguity of news credibility (with 35% trusting false information) underlines the vulnerability of students to rumor campaigns.
- Social media simultaneously provides religious advice and opens doors to extremist or destructive ideologies, confirming its dual role in shaping values.
- Finally, the tendency of platforms to amplify political and economic problems fosters discontent and weakens attachment to the state.

Overall, these findings support the hypothesis that Fourth Generation Wars, waged primarily through media and cultural penetration, pose a tangible threat to the cultural identity of Algerian youth.

## Conclusion

Fourth Generation Wars differ fundamentally from traditional conflicts. They are not fought primarily on physical battlefields but rather in the hearts and minds of societies. Their primary weapon is information, their battlefield is culture, and their targets are nations' values, beliefs, and cohesion.

The study of Setif 2 University students shows that social media has become a double-edged sword. While it enables communication and access to knowledge, it also opens the door to hostile narratives, rumors, and cultural erosion. Students' heavy reliance on dialectal Arabic, mixed with foreign languages, reflects the weakening of Modern Standard Arabic as a marker of identity. Similarly, their exposure to both beneficial and extremist religious content reveals the ambivalent role of new media.

Most importantly, the findings reveal that social media plays a significant role in shaping political perceptions, often amplifying dissatisfaction with the state. This aligns with the broader strategy of Fourth Generation Wars, which aim to weaken nations internally, paving the way for external manipulation.

Ultimately, the study underscores the urgent need to strengthen cultural resilience, reinforce national identity, and equip youth with critical media literacy skills.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study proposes the following:

1. **Family education:** Families must instill strong national and religious values in children from an early age.

2. **Awareness campaigns:** Students should be educated about the risks of Fourth Generation Wars, especially the dangers of unquestioningly adopting foreign values promoted on social media.
3. **Media responsibility:** Journalists and media outlets must verify and fact-check information before publication to reduce the spread of rumors.
4. **Role of institutions:** Schools, universities, and mosques should be actively engaged in protecting youth from extremist ideologies and reinforcing social cohesion.
5. **Promotion of Arabic:** Greater efforts should be made to encourage the use of Modern Standard Arabic in academic and public communication, preserving it as a key symbol of cultural identity.

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### AI Statement

This document has been enhanced through the use of Grammarly which was employed to refine its linguistic style and correct grammar and spelling. While the incorporation of these technologies may introduce some AI-generated linguistic patterns, it is important to note that the core intellectual content, data interpretation, and conclusions presented are entirely the work of the author.

### Statement of Absence of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the research, findings, or recommendations presented in this paper. All conclusions drawn are independent and unbiased.

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