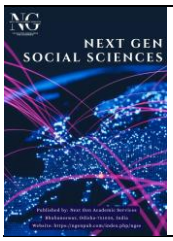

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Review Article

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Global Migration Dynamics and Identity Formation in Transnational Societies

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ABSTRACT

International migration has become one of the most significant demographic phenomena of the twenty-first century. In 2024, the population living outside of their place of birth was about 304 million, an increase from 140 million in 1990, 28.8% of the world's population. At the same time, forced displacement hit a new all-time high, at 123.2 million people, a result of conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan, Syria and Afghanistan. In this context, migrants are now making claims to multiple, negotiated identities as they mix cultural traditions, languages, and socioeconomic practices in transnational social spaces, which they then negotiate within state policy regimes, labour markets, and global inequalities. This research uses a mixed-method designs approach and analyzes the datasets on migration from various sources, such as the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the World Bank, in addition to qualitative case studies of Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, Syrian refugees in Germany, South Asian migrants in Saudi Arabia, and transnational youth in Mexico–United States contexts. The quantitative results show a significant regional variation in migration stocks, gender and refugee distribution. The results show that identity formation is very context-dependent: inclusive policies promote hybrid identities and socioeconomic contributions, while exclusive policies create precarious statuses of permanent and impermanent that limit belonging.

1. Introduction

Human mobility is a defining feature of the early twenty-first century, on a scale and at a level not seen before. The number of migrants in 2024 is about 304 million, up from 154 million in 1990, accounting for 3.7% of the global population (Dao et al., 2021). This near doubling is explained by the cumulative impact of several factors, including growing economic differences between the Global North and South, an increase in armed conflicts and political persecution, demographic imbalances, environmental pressures, and the growing cost and risk of moving with the advent of transnational social networks. This near doubling is due to a number of drivers: economic differences between the Global North and South, rising number of armed conflicts and political persecution, demographic imbalances, environmental pressures and the increasing cost and risk of moving with the development of transnational social

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networks (Chepelenko, 2023). At the same time, forced displacement has reached its highest levels ever recorded. As of the end of 2024, there were 123.2 million forcibly displaced people worldwide, including 43.7 million refugees, 8 million asylum seekers, and 72.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Pietrostefani et al., 2025). Nearly half of all people living on Earth are now forced to live elsewhere, twice the proportion 10 years ago.

These flows are localised and differentiated. In 2020, the total number of international migrants in Europe and Asia was roughly equal at 85–87 million, and Oceania had the largest proportion of its population living abroad as international migrants (21.4%). The highest level of concentration is found in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, where migrants make up more than 52% of the total population of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) (Wagle, 2024). Most migration in Africa continues to be within the continent (some 21 million migrants in 2020 lived in another African country), with the greatest relative change in intraregional mobility occurring in Latin America and the Caribbean (+72% between 2000 and 2020) (Tomoiaga, 1990).

In addition to demographic change, migration has a profound transformative effect on identities. Post-structural and post-colonial scholarship also highlights the hybrid and fluid nature of identities as well as their intersectional nature, which is generated through individuals' agency and structural factors such as race, class, gender or legal status (Stasiulis et al., 2020). Transnationalism, as a concept, was first systematically formulated by Basch, Glick Schiller, and Szanton Blanc and is defined by migrants' ability to create multistranded social fields between their societies of origin and settlement, while simultaneously maintaining family, economic, and political connections across borders. These transnational social fields depart from methodological nationalism and the idea that identities fit easily into national space (Wang, 2020). However, the literature remains divided, as research often addresses regional migration within a single country or a specific group, while the comparative issue of the interaction between regional migration dynamics, policy regimes, and the resulting pattern of identity negotiation remains less explored. This article is about that. It asks the following: (1) What has changed over the past 10 years in migration and displacement of people across regions of the world? How do structures of policy and socioeconomic issues shape migrants' identity negotiation in transnational settings? (3) What are the implications on migration governance, integration policies and human rights?

This research is situated within the framework of global migration and identity formation, and its comparative study design, combining mixed methods, contributes to transnationalism, cultural hybridity, and relational integration theories, and offers evidence-based policy recommendations for practitioners and policy decision-makers.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Migration Theory: From Push–Pull to Transnationalism

According to classical migration theory, the factors driving migration can be grouped into push and pull factors: poverty, persecution, conflict, environmental disasters, employment opportunities, safety, family reunification, and quality of life are all considered push and pull factors (Hoffmann, 2019). This categorisation is analytically useful for identifying root causes, but it has been challenged by the emphasis on individual decision-making rather than on structural settings that facilitate or hinder mobility. By emphasising social networks, network theory goes further, showing how established migrants lower informational and financial costs for prospective migrants, which leads to cumulative causation and chain migration (Thompson, 2017). Initial migration creates economic niches and information networks that continue to facilitate migration even when conditions change.

The transnationalism paradigm, which fundamentally shifts the lens from settlement to multisited practice, defines transmigrants as immigrants who develop and maintain social relations between their societies of origin and settlement. Building on this, (Tedeschi et al., 2022) define transnational social fields as networks of networks that cross the boundaries of any one nation-state, including networks of family connections, remittance networks, political mobilisation networks, and cultural exchange networks. This approach unites identity with no national territory and sheds light on the development of cross-border citizenship and diaspora politics.

2.2. Identity Theory, Cultural Hybridity, and Intersectionality

There are several complementary ways of theorising identity formation in migration contexts. Social identity theory distinguishes the personal self-concept from social categories such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, and language (Barua & Maheshwari, 2025). Migration scholarship focuses on the cultural hybridity of blending different elements of cultures to create new dynamic identities. Homi Bhabha's idea of the "third space" describes the space

of "cultural negotiation" which is neither exclusively dominated by the culture of the heritage nor the culture of the host society, but is a hybrid space that produces new hybrid subjectivities (Kaur, 2023).

Intersectional lenses also show how race, gender, class and legal status interact to produce distinct experiences of belonging and exclusion among migrants. Research across the diverse contexts of Latinx transnational communities, Syrian refugees in Europe, and contract workers from South Asia in the Gulf shows how the layered dimensions of identity negotiation will differ across these contexts. This means that there is no one 'migrant experience' but rather the emergence of a multitude of subject positions, located where individual biographies meet macro-structural processes (Kangas-Müller, 2024).

2.3. Relational Integration Theory

Assimilation models that are dominant in the pastliterature, equate successful integration with migrants' assimilation into the ethnic majority by intermarriage, language adoption, and acculturation into dominant institutions. Post-colonial and feminist scholars have challenged this model, as it naturalises whiteness as the ultimate goal of integration and ignores difference and hybridity, favouring the assimilation of migrants into majority groups (Kofman, 2023) instead. Relational integration theory provides an alternative, third way: integration reimagined as a balancing of power dynamics between majority and migrant populations, acknowledging difference and hybridity without subordinating either. This model represents a transition from integration at the individual migrant level to integration within a social relationship, recognising that the host society must also change to be inclusive and equitable towards migrants (Phillimore et al., 2024).

2.4. Mobility and Globalisation Frameworks

"mobility turn" places migration in the context of wider regimes of movement of capital, information and people. The demand for mobile labour—from "old" to "new"—from Europe (ageing populations) to the Gulf (construction and care economies) is linked to the production of precarity and inequality that is pushing migrants from the Global South. Geopolitical arrangements influence the governance of migration: the European Union and Turkey agreement on refugees, the asylum system in the United States and the kafala system of sponsorship in the Gulf are all different governance regimes with significant impact on migrants' legal situation, economic integration and identity formation (Triandafyllidou et al., 2024).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The research design in this study is an integrated mixed-methods design with a comparative approach, involving a macro-level quantitative analysis of global migration trends and a micro-level qualitative analysis of migrants' identity negotiation across four regional case studies. Using methods together allows cross-validation of the large-scale patterns of structure with lived experience, which does not exist if either a quantitative or a qualitative approach is taken alone.

3.2. Quantitative Data Sources

Quantitative data was retrieved from publicly available data from international sources that spanned the period between 2010 and 2024, namely, UN DESA International Migrant Stock datasets (2020, 2024), the IOM World Migration Report 2024 (2024), the ECLAC/CEPAL Review on Latin American and Caribbean migration, UNHCR Global Trends and Mid-Year Trends reports (UNHCR, 2024) and World Bank Migration and Development Briefs on remittances (World Bank, 2022). The data were harmonised into comparable units (million persons, percentages of regional population) and presented in cross-regional tables. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to identify trends, outliers, and regional patterns.

3.3. Qualitative Case Studies

Four case studies were chosen to reflect the diversity of policy contexts, regions and migrant groups: (1) Venezuelan migrants in Colombia, a large-scale intraregional crisis characterized by a changing rights-based policy response; (2) Syrian refugees in Germany, representing a humanitarian response operating in a liberal democratic policy regime; (3) middle-class migrants from South Asia in Saudi Arabia, a restrictive policy regime of New Migrant sponsorship (kafala); and (4) transnational youth in Mexico-US contexts, highlighting a context of circular mobility and bilingual identity negotiation. Published ethnographies, policy analyses and interview studies were used as data sources and thematically coded for the following themes: Identity negotiation strategies; Policy context and legal status; Gender and class dimensions of migrant experience. Comparing information from multiple sources and case studies increases analytical validity.NGSS

3.4. Limitations

The study uses secondary data and published case studies, which limits the ability to compare qualitative evidence across methodological traditions. There are areas that are not well-represented, especially Oceania and Sub-Saharan Africa. Ideally, the case studies are purposive, but they can by no means represent the richness of the migrant population worldwide. The results are therefore meant to be analysed as illustrative rather than representative.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Global and Regional Migration Patterns

In 2024, the world's stock of international migrants increased to 304 million, equivalent to 3.7% of the world's population, almost double the 154 million recorded in 1990 and up from 250 million recorded in 2015 (Hossin, 2020). The steady rise is driven by underlying migration trends, despite pandemic-related limitations. The figures of forced displacement have increased even more rapidly – from 59.5 million in 2014 to more than 123.2 million by the end of 2024, which is a more than 100% increase in ten years (Tsapenko, 2021). The four countries with the largest share of the world's forcibly displaced population are Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine, with over one-third coming from these nations.

Regional patterns result from the interplay of demographic, economic, and geopolitical influences. There were more than 85 million international migrants living in Europe and Asia in 2020, and by 2024, the number had reached 94.1 million (Rostetska et al., 2023). Oceania had the highest proportion of migrants within the total population (21.4%), followed by North America (15.7%) and Europe (11.6%), with fewer migrants from Asia, Africa, and Latin America (all below 3%) (Zatonatska et al., 2024). The GCC states are an extreme case as migrants account for more than 52% of the combined resident population, given that the Gulf economies are highly dependent on the migrant workforce in the context of limited citizenship rights.

Most of Africa's migration flows are within the region. Around 21 million Africans reside in other African countries, and 19.5 million Africans live outside Africa (mainly in Europe – 11 million, Asia – 5 million, Northern America – de Haas & Frankema, 2025). Protracted conflicts drive refugee flows: South Sudan accounted for 2.3 million refugees, while the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan each accounted for 0.8 to 0.9 million. As hosts, Uganda (1.5 million refugees) and Ethiopia (0.9 million refugees) are carrying the heaviest burden of hosting refugees.

Asia has the highest origin and destination functions. In 2020, more than 115 million individuals, mostly from Asia, lived outside their countries of birth, with 69 million living in Asia, 23 million in Europe, and 17.5 million in North America. Construction and domestic jobs in the Gulf States are dominated by males, while in other parts of South and Southeast Asia, the job markets are gender-balanced. Syria (6.5 million) and Afghanistan (5.7 million) were the world's top two refugee-producing countries, with Turkey, Iran and Pakistan hosting the majority of their refugees (3.6 million, 3.4 million and 1.7 million, respectively) (IOM, 2024). Remittances from Asian diasporas are a key source of development capital: India received USD 111 billion in 2022, the highest level ever recorded, while the Philippines received USD 38 billion (World Bank, 2022; IOM, 2024).

In fact, intraregional migration in Latin America and the Caribbean grew at the highest relative rates, increasing by 72% between 2000 and 2020 and accounting for 14.8 million migrants by 2020 (CEPAL, 2023). The second largest displacement crisis in the world is the mobilisation crisis in Venezuela, with an estimated 7.1 million Venezuelans having left their country by 2022 (Hussein, 2024). By October 2022, Colombia was home to 2.9 million Venezuelan migrants, the vast majority of whom had arrived by road (Rossiasco & de Narváez, 2023). As of October 2022, Colombia was home to the majority of Venezuelan migrants (5% of Colombia's total population, 40% of all migrants from Venezuela in Latin America), most of whom arrived by road. The number of asylum applications in Colombia grew by 2,453% from 2017 to 2022, and recognition of refugees remains very low: 1,289 cases (Rossiasco & de Narváez, 2023).

4.2. Case Study I: Venezuelan Migrants in Colombia – Rights-Based Integration and Hybrid Identity

The rights-based approach is evolving in response to the Colombian government's response to displacement from Venezuela. Launched in 2021, the Temporary Protected Status for Venezuelan Migrants (ETPV) guarantees regularisation of status for up to 10 years, health insurance, access to education, and formal employment (Rossiasco & de Narváez, 2023). Such an approach transforms migrants' status from illegal presence to one in which they have certain rights, and it has been applied internationally to move away from a regime of exclusion (Summers et al., 2022).

In the light of qualitative analysis, Colombia's immigration policy is relatively more open, providing grounds for hybrid identity formation that can be termed 'conditional'. Venezuelan immigrants engage in cross-border economic interactions, maintain strong cultural and family ties to Venezuela, and are increasingly engaged in political activism in both their home and destination countries. The majority of immigrants (51%) are women, and they face gender-specific restrictions that hinder access to the workforce; they are confined to informal sectors of employment and domestic services (Rossiasco & de Narváez, 2023). Xenophobia persists as an actual phenomenon, while residing in an irregular status prior to regularisation processes makes people highly vulnerable. Nonetheless, in economic terms, immigration from Venezuela is beneficial for the Colombian economy, potentially increasing its GDP by 0.7-0.9 percentage points through migrant labour.

4.3. Case Study II: Syrian Refugees in Germany – Humanitarian Reception and the Limits of Linguistic Integration

Germany's open-door policy of 2015–2016 admitted approximately one million asylum seekers, positioning the country as a central actor in European refugee protection. Hamburg alone received approximately 56,000 asylum seekers from 146 countries by 2018, of whom 27% were from Afghanistan and 19% from Syria (Berg, 2025). More broadly, Germany hosted approximately 2 million refugees by the end of 2022, and more than 200,000 people were naturalised as German citizens in 2023, with Syrian nationals accounting for 38% (75,500) of new citizenships (Destatis, 2024).

Berg's (2025) qualitative study of 62 refugees in Hamburg reveals a critical finding: language acquisition, widely regarded as the cornerstone of integration policy, does not protect refugees from exclusion. Othering operates through intersecting axes of race, religion, and gender, persisting even among linguistically proficient refugees. The study identifies a form of "digital othering" in which restricted internet access in refugee accommodation facilities functions as a mechanism of social marginalisation, limiting refugees' access to employment information, educational resources, and social networks (Berg, 2025). This finding is consistent with broader evidence that digital exclusion reinforces socioeconomic inequality and constrains identity formation in host societies (Emmer et al., 2020; AbuJarour, 2022).

Refugees' self-agency is nonetheless evident: participants in Berg's (2025) study navigate social and digital barriers through community networks, informal economic activity, and strategic use of available digital resources. German naturalisation data signal that integration pathways exist for those with longer residence and strong institutional engagement. Yet the evidence collectively underscores that integration requires more than individual adaptation—it demands transformative change in host society attitudes and infrastructure, aligned with Klarenbeek's (2024) relational integration framework.

4.4. Case Study III: South Asian Migrants in Saudi Arabia – Permanent Impermanence and Ambivalent Belonging

Saudi Arabia hosts one of the world's largest migrant populations. Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis together constitute the largest migrant group, with migrants comprising over 80% of the private sector workforce (Jamal, 2023). Citizenship and long-term residency pathways are structurally restricted under the kafala (sponsorship) system, which historically tied a migrant worker's legal status entirely to their employer. This arrangement creates acute power asymmetries: employer-controlled job mobility, country exit, and residency renewal, generating conditions widely criticised by international labour organisations as incompatible with modern labour standards (ILO, 2023; Robinson, 2022).

Jamal's (2023) qualitative study of middle-class South Asian migrants in Saudi Arabia introduces the concept of "permanent impermanence" to capture the structural uncertainty that characterises long-term residence without legal permanency. Despite stringent policies, some migrants develop sophisticated strategies to extend their stay: cultivating personal relationships with sponsors, obtaining premium residency permits, investing in property, or negotiating alternative sponsorships. These strategies reflect both migrant agency and systemic vulnerability, producing ambivalent identities that are simultaneously diasporic (maintaining strong homeland ties and return aspirations) and locally embedded (investing in housing, schooling, and community life in Saudi Arabia).

The June 2025 abolition of the kafala system and its replacement with a contractual employment model marks a potentially transformative shift, granting migrant workers the right to change employers without prior approval and to leave the country without an exit visa (ImpACT, 2025). If robustly implemented—particularly for domestic workers currently excluded from reforms—this change could fundamentally alter the identity landscape for South Asian migrants by reducing the precarity that sustains ambivalent belonging.

4.5. Case Study IV: Transnational Youth in Mexico–US Contexts – Bilingualism, Hybridity, and Digital Identity

Transnational youth navigating the Mexico–US borderlands offer perhaps the most theoretically generative case for understanding identity formation in an age of circular mobility and digital connectivity. Research by (Aviles & Pablo, 2014) demonstrates how individuals raised across national contexts develop fluid, bilingual identities that draw on multiple cultural repertoires simultaneously. Return migrant children in Mexico reconstruct their identities by drawing on sociocultural assets from both sides of the border—participating in English-language courses while maintaining Spanish-language community practices (Aviles & Mora Pablo, 2014). show that young adults actively deploy hybrid identities as strategic resources to navigate discrimination and access economic opportunities in both countries.

Translanguaging—the fluid, integrated use of two or more languages beyond code-switching—emerges as both a communicative practice and an identity claim, asserting belonging to multiple communities simultaneously (Núñez Asomoza, 2022). Digital platforms amplify this dynamic: social media, messaging applications, and online communities enable transnational youth to maintain real-time connections with communities on both sides of the border, perform hybrid cultural identities for multiple audiences, and access information and educational resources that would otherwise be unavailable (Mansouri, 2025). Sociocultural remittances—values, norms, and practices transmitted through transnational social networks—flow in multiple directions, influencing identity in both origin and destination communities (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004).

This case illustrates that identity formation among transnational youth is not a problem to be solved through assimilation but a dynamic resource to be cultivated. Inclusive educational policies that recognise and support bilingualism and biculturalism—rather than demanding linguistic and cultural conformity—facilitate more equitable integration outcomes (Summers et al., 2022).

4.6. Cross-Case Analysis: Structural Forces and Identity Formation

Across the four case studies, a consistent pattern emerges: the relationship between policy regime and identity outcome is structural rather than individual. Rights-based integration (Colombia) creates conditions for hybrid identity formation and socioeconomic contribution. Humanitarian reception in the context of social exclusion (Germany) produces partial integration and contested belonging, even among linguistically proficient migrants. Restrictive sponsorship (Saudi Arabia) generates permanent impermanence and ambivalent diasporic identity. Circular mobility with inclusive education (Mexico–US) enables bilingual hybridity as an identity resource.

Gender and class intersect significantly with these structural patterns. Women constitute nearly half of global migrants but are disproportionately concentrated in informal, low-wage sectors across all contexts (IOM, 2024). The predominantly male composition of Gulf labour migration contrasts with the gender dynamics of Venezuelan migration to Colombia (51% women) and Syrian asylum-seeking in Germany. Middle-class migrants across contexts possess greater resources to navigate restrictive regimes than low-wage workers, producing internally differentiated migrant communities with divergent identity trajectories (Jamal, 2023).

The findings collectively support Klarenbeek's (2024) relational integration framework: integration is not a property of individual migrants but an emergent quality of social relationships between migrants and host societies. Policies that address power asymmetries, provide rights-based foundations, and combat structural othering create conditions for more equitable and dynamic forms of belonging. Conversely, policies organised around exclusion, surveillance, and restriction reproduce precarity and constrain the hybrid identities that could enrich transnational societies.

5. Policy Implications and Recommendations

Drawing on the empirical analysis, six interconnected policy recommendations emerge for governments, civil society organisations, and international bodies:

i. Implement rights-based integration frameworks. Colombia's Temporary Protected Status demonstrates that regularisation combined with access to social services transforms migrants from recipients of charity into contributors to economic growth. Host states should provide legal status, access to healthcare, education, and formal employment as foundational conditions for integration (Rossiasco & de Narváez, 2023; Summers et al., 2022).

ii. Reform restrictive sponsorship and labour migration systems. The kafala system created structural conditions for exploitation and a permanently impermanent identity. Saudi Arabia's 2025 abolition represents a significant reform, yet domestic workers remain excluded. Complete reform should extend full labour rights, job mobility, and

pathways to long-term residency for all migrant categories (ILO, 2023).

iii. Promote equitable digital access. Digital exclusion functions as a mechanism of social marginalisation that compounds other forms of othering. Integration strategies must include provision of internet access, digital literacy training, and device support within refugee accommodation and migrant community settings (Berg, 2025; AbuJarour, 2022).

iv. Address structural othering beyond language. Germany's case demonstrates that language proficiency alone does not prevent exclusion. Anti-discrimination legislation, intercultural dialogue, and public education campaigns are necessary complements to language training programmes. Integration policies must address power relations and social attitudes, not merely linguistic barriers (Berg, 2025; Klarenbeek, 2024).

v. Support transnational engagement and diaspora participation. Policies should facilitate low-cost remittance transfers, diaspora investment in origin communities, and formal mechanisms for diaspora political participation. Recognising migrants' transnational ties and dual loyalties, rather than demanding assimilation, leverages their bridging capacity for mutual development (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Hussein, 2024).

vi. Develop legal frameworks for climate-induced displacement. International law does not yet recognise climate refugees. Regional agreements, particularly in Asia and Africa, must develop early warning systems, planned relocation mechanisms, and climate adaptation finance to address the displacement already underway and projected to intensify (IOM, 2024; UNHCR, 2024).

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that global migration dynamics and identity formation in transnational societies are structurally intertwined. Drawing on a mixed-methods comparative analysis of global datasets and four regional case studies, it has documented pronounced regional disparities in migration stocks, gender composition, and refugee distributions—with forced displacement reaching historically unprecedented levels. Through qualitative analysis, it has been shown that identity formation is profoundly context-dependent: rights-based frameworks facilitate hybrid identities and socioeconomic contribution; restrictive regimes produce permanent impermanence and ambivalent belonging; and inclusive digital and educational environments enable transnational youth to deploy bilingual hybridity as an identity resource. These findings carry significant theoretical implications. They validate transnationalism's critique of assimilationist models and support relational integration theory's insistence that integration is a property of social relationships rather than merely of individual migrants. They demonstrate that identity formation is co-produced by migrant agency and structural conditions, and that structural change in host societies is as necessary as individual adaptation. The intersectionality of race, class, gender, and legal status produces differentiated migrant experiences that single-axis frameworks cannot adequately capture. The article's findings also carry urgent practical implications. The record levels of forced displacement, the persistence of precarious labour migration regimes, the inequities of digital access, and the inadequacy of climate displacement frameworks all demand more robust, rights-based, and evidence-informed governance. Recognising migrants as active agents with multifaceted, hybrid identities, rather than passive recipients of humanitarian charity or threats to national cohesion, is both analytically accurate and politically necessary for building the inclusive transnational societies that the twenty-first century demands.

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AI Use Declaration: The author declares that Grammarly was used only for language refinement, grammar correction, spelling correction, punctuation improvement, and enhancement of sentence clarity. The author has reviewed and verified all changes made with the assistance of Grammarly and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and scholarly content of the manuscript.

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